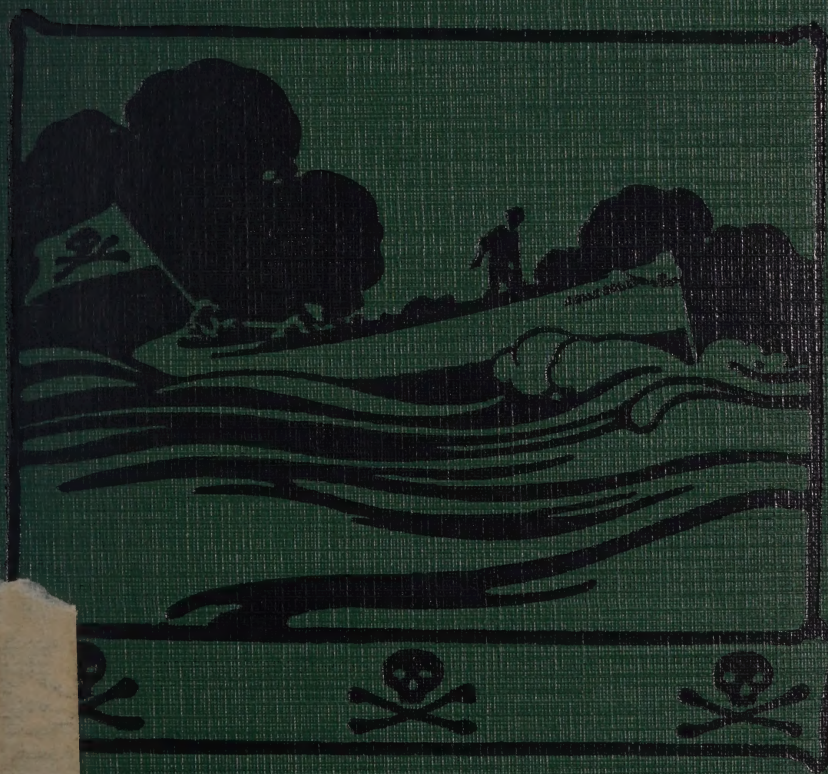


PUD PRINGLE PIRATE



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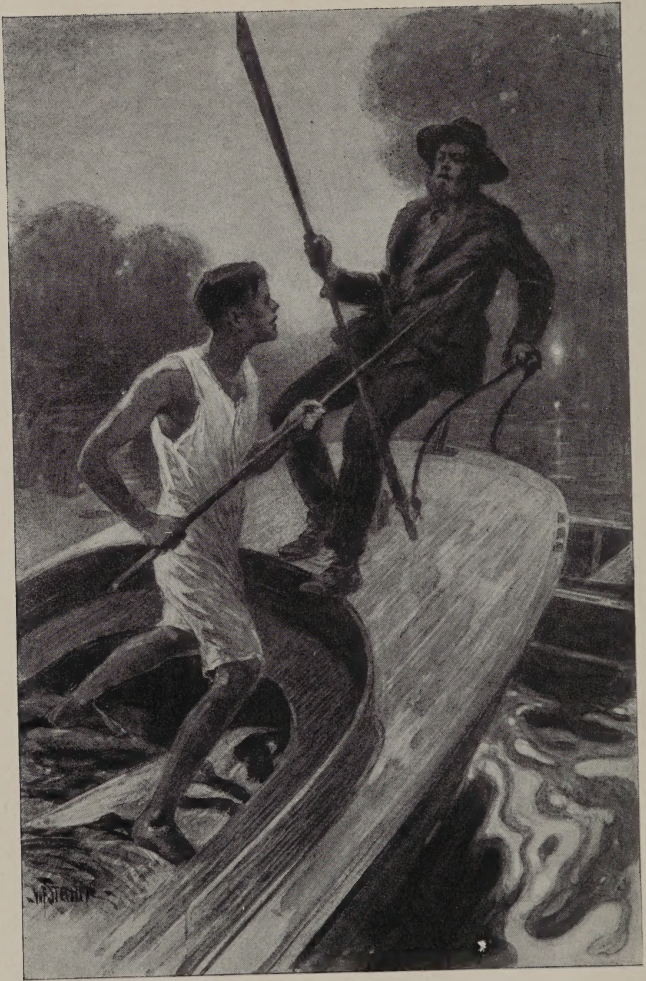
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PUD PRINGLE, PIRATE



PUD CHARGED TOWARD THE ENEMY (*page 218*)

PUD PRINGLE, PIRATE

BY
RALPH HENRY BARBOUR



BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
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PUD PRINGLE, PIRATE

∴

CHAPTER I

MR. TULLY MISUNDERSTANDS

‘AND now, Mr. Pringle, what can I do for you, sir?’

Mr. Ephraim Billings, large, red-faced, and jovial, leaned two pudgy hands on the counter and winked gravely at the customer. The customer ignored the wink and replied with impressive dignity.

‘Half a pound of leese and a dozen chemons, please.’

‘Half a pound o’ *what?*’

‘Half a pound of cheese, Mr. Eph,’ said the boy patiently.

‘Oh! Well, why in tarnation didn’t you say so?’

‘Didn’t I?’

‘You know pesky well you didn’t! You said half a chound of peese and —’

‘And a chozen demons,’ added Pud helpfully.

‘Say!’ Mr. Billings glared ferociously. ‘What is it you *do* want, consarn you?’

'Cheese and lemons, please. Half of each. Ma said send her the same kind of cheese she had the last time; Herk — Herk —'

'Herkimer County, eh? All right, son. You Egbert! Get me half a chos — half a dozen lemons outside. Consarn you, Pud, you've got me all twisted!'

Pud Pringle grinned. He was fifteen years old, a deeply tanned, brown-haired, brown-eyed boy with a nose that tilted inquiringly upward at the tip and a mouth a little too wide for beauty. Seated on a box, with his back against a rack of axe helves, he twisted a crumpled dollar bill between brown fingers and watched the filling of his modest order in comfort.

'How's your folks, Pud?' asked the grocer as he wrapped up the wedge of cheese. 'Ma well?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Saw your pa this morning, so I don't need to ask about him, I guess. Where's that side-partner of yours, Tim Daley? Don't look natural for you to be alone.'

'Oh, he's somewhere around,' replied Pud indifferently.

'Huh! Been and had a quarrel, have you?'

Pud chose to ignore the question. Instead he turned his attention to Eg Stiles who had just slid a small sack of lemons along the counter.

Egbert was a tall, thin, sour-looking youth of sixteen. Pud didn't like Eg, and Eg didn't like Pud. For that matter, Eg didn't like any one, it seemed. He was a born pessimist, and two summers under the influence of Mr. Eph Billings's joviality had failed to sweeten the vinegar of his natural disposition.

'How many rotten ones you got in there, Eg?' asked Pud.

'None,' answered the clerk, scowling.

Pud slipped off the box and emptied the lemons on the counter. Mr. Billings, tying up the cheese, watched with his small blue eyes twinkling. Pud gravely set aside two of the six lemons.

'You'd better hustle me two more, Eg,' he announced. 'I don't like 'em with green whiskers.'

'I gave them to you as they came,' grumbled Egbert. 'Those two are all right if you use them quick.'

Mr. Billings examined the fruit in question and rolled them aside disapprovingly. 'Get a couple more, Egbert,' he directed. 'I've told you not to sell soft fruit, ain't I? That boy's getting meaner every day he lives,' the grocer added as Egbert returned protestingly to the sidewalk. 'These lemons ain't a mite sourer than what he is! Let's see; twenty-eight for

cheese and twenty for lemons; forty-eight cents.' He took Pud's dollar bill and punched the keys of the cash register. 'I suppose this is genuine, Pud? Didn't make it yourself, did you?'

'Make what, sir?'

'This dollar. There's been some queer money floating around here lately. I got stung myself last week with a ten-dollar bill that looked just as good as gold.' He pushed Pud's change across the counter. 'Two is fifty and fifty's one dollar. Thank you.'

'Say, do you mean counterfeit money?' asked Pud eagerly. 'Gee, Mr. Eph, I never saw any. Got any now? What's it look like?'

'Never saw any, eh?' Mr. Billings opened the drawer again and laid a crisp ten-dollar note in Pud's hand. 'Well, son, it looks just like that.'

Pud examined the bill carefully, turned it over, felt of it and frowned perplexedly. 'Gee, it *looks* all right, doesn't it?' he said. 'Got silk threads in it and everything!'

'You'd take that for the genuine thing, wouldn't you?' asked the grocer.

'We — ell, I guess maybe it looks almost *too* good,' answered Pud cautiously. 'I guess I'd sort of suspect it, Mr. Eph.'

'Would, eh?' Mr. Billings chuckled as he

restored the bill to the drawer. 'Well, you wouldn't need to, Pud. That bill's one of Uncle Sam's best.'

'What? Why, I thought you said —'

'You wanted to know what a counterfeit bill *looked* like, Pud. Well, it looks just like a good one. If it didn't, it wouldn't fool any one, I guess.'

Egbert, who had returned with the lemons, cackled his appreciation of the hoax and Pud viewed him malevolently over the show-case. 'Huh,' he said. 'Well, I guess no one couldn't fool me with any old counterfeits! I guess —'

But just then Miss Snelling came in and Pud took up his purchases and departed, unpleasantly conscious of Egbert's amused snuffles. Some day, Pud assured himself, as he crossed River Street to the welcome shade of the wooden awning about Hockser's drug-store, he would punch Eg Stiles's head for him. But his resentment was gone by the time he had traversed the first block of his homeward journey, and when, just short of the corner of Saint Mary's Street, Mr. Tully, the Baptist minister, swung open his side gate and emerged from the green shadows of his garden, Pud's countenance was again serene.

Pud's serenity, though, was largely external. Inside, he was mildly disturbed. If he had seen

the minister sooner, he would have ducked through a gate, pretending business at some one's back door. Not that Pud disliked Mr. Tully. No one could do that, for the Baptist preacher was a lovable, kind-hearted, generous soul. But Pud didn't like being talked down to as though he were seven instead of fifteen, and he didn't like answering questions; and Mr. Tully had an unfortunately patronizing tone with boys, and could ask more questions — Pud called them 'fool questions' to himself — than any one in the village of Millville. Then, too, Pud had another reason for not caring to converse with Mr. Tully this morning, which was that Pud had failed to attend Sunday School three days since. Mr. Tully might not have noted the fact, or might have forgotten it, but Pud would have preferred not meeting the preacher.

'Good morning, Anson,' greeted Mr. Tully, smiling very heartily. 'I hope you are well this beautiful morning, my boy.'

'Yes, sir, thanks.' Pud returned the smile with one of guileless sweetness and would have gone on. But Mr. Tully, beaming through his glasses, which, as usual, leaned at a rakish angle from his long, thin nose, continued:

'Ah, returning from an errand to the store, doubtless.' He glanced approvingly at the

packages. 'Being a help to your dear parents. Yes, yes. And how are they, my boy? Well, I trust? Your mother?'

'Yes, sir, *she's* all right.'

'Eh! You don't mean that your father is — ah — indisposed?'

'He got up this morning, sir,' replied Pud.

'Dear me! Why, I hadn't heard! What is his trouble?'

Pud's clear brown eyes set themselves on that far distant point that in optics is termed infinity and assumed a sort of trance-like fixity. Had Mr. Tully known the boy a great deal better, the peculiarity of that gaze would have warned him.

'The doctor,' replied Pud, almost dreamily, 'didn't say.'

'Well, well! And which doctor — But, of course, you have Doctor Timmons, don't you? And so Doctor Timmons didn't know what the trouble was?'

'Well, he didn't say,' answered Pud cautiously 'And I guess if a doctor knows what's the matter he's going to tell, isn't he, sir?'

'Oh, undoubtedly, undoubtedly. Well, let us hope that your father's illness is not — ah — serious. You say he is up to-day?'

'Yes, sir, he got up, but he didn't go to the office.'

'Strange that no one told me,' marveled the preacher. 'Dear me, I'm afraid your dear mother thinks me — ah — very derelict in my duty, Anson. Not that I blame her. No, no, by no manner of means. Well, I must certainly call right away.' Then a frown puckered Mr. Tully's brow as he produced a big gold watch and peered at it. 'This forenoon, though, I — I have to attend a meeting of the Library Committee. I had quite forgotten it at the moment. But after dinner — yes, yes, after dinner, most certainly. Will you bear my condolences to your parents, please, and say that I will drop in this afternoon? I simply can't understand how the — ah — news of your father's indisposition failed to reach me, Anson. Most extraordinary, is it not, my boy?'

'Yes, sir — no, sir —'

'Well, well, we must all bear our trials with Christian fortitude, Anson. A beautiful day, is it not?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Yes, a beautiful day in a beautiful season of the year.' Mr. Tully inspected the sky and the trees and the sloping street, deep in gray dust after a fortnight of rainless June weather, and smiled approvingly. 'Yes, a beautiful day,' he murmured. Then, arousing himself with a start, he patted Pud on the shoulder, beamed

kindly and strode on with quick, nervous steps.

Pud heaved a sigh of relief. Mr. Tully had not called him to task for missing Sunday School. Going on, he realized that one reason he disliked conversing with the minister was because the latter invariably called him 'Anson.' Nobody else called him 'Anson' except the teachers and Great-Aunt Sabrina, and his parents when they were displeased with him. Every one else called him 'Pud,' which was the first syllable of his middle name, Puddlestone. Until he went to school he had been called 'Anse.' At school, the very first day, the teacher had compelled Pud to reveal his full title, and his companions had hailed that middle name with wild glee and he had been 'Puddle' until the novelty had worn off and the briefer 'Pud' had been substituted. Puddlestone was Great-Aunt Sabrina's name and Pud had been named for her. She lived at Livermore, twenty miles down the river, and, in Pud's estimation at least, was fabulously wealthy.

About two thirds along the next block — Pud was walking slowly and keeping to the shade of the oaks and maples — his thoughts returned to the conversation with Mr. Tully and he chuckled. Then the chuckle was suc-

ceeded by an expression of doubt. Mr. Tully would be sure to call after dinner and learn that Pud's father had gone to Thatcher for the day and Pud would be called on for explanations, and his explanations didn't do much good. Pud's conscience didn't trouble him a bit, for he had told nothing but the truth to the minister, but his mother never could be made to see the difference between telling fibs and telling the truth as Pud sometimes told it. Pud sighed. Life was very difficult at times!

Choosing the side gate rather than the front, Pud made his way along the grass-grown driveway, that, flanked by ancient syringa bushes, led to a dilapidated stable at the rear of the lot. Once, when Pud was a very small boy, the stable had held a horse and a carriage. Now it held nothing but rubbish and discarded furniture, and was used by none save Pud. Pud didn't, of course, go on to the stable. He stopped at the little latticed porch at the back of the small white house, crossed it, and pulled open the screen door. Mrs Pringle was busy at the kitchen table, a short, plump, placid woman in a crisp blue house-dress.

'You've been gone a very long time, dear,' she said as Pud entered. 'I've been waiting for those lemons quite twenty minutes.'

'Well, you just want to blame that old min-

ister, then,' said Pud defensively. 'Gee, he can talk more in ten minutes —'

'Pud, you mustn't speak like that about Mr. Tully. What did he talk about?'

'About — oh, about the weather, and you and dad, and how he was going to call after dinner, and —'

'Call here?' exclaimed Mrs. Pringle. 'Sakes alive, what for? You're sure he said *after* dinner?'

'Yes'm.'

'Well, I wonder what he's coming about,' mused Pud's mother. 'Look in the refrigerator, dear, and see if there's any root beer there. Mr. Tully is awfully fond of it.'

'If there is,' asked Pud, 'can I have some, Ma?'

'No, you cannot. There's only a few bottles left, and with Mr. Tully coming —' Mrs. Pringle subsided into murmurs as she seized the egg-beater. Pud reported three bottles on the ice and wandered out to the porch again. From there, across a picket fence, he was confronted by the rear end of the Daleys' house. The Daleys' place was very much like the Pringles'. The house was modest in size, white with green shutters, and placed so close to Arundel Street that fully half of the deep lot was vacant save for a stable set close to the

back line. Almost all the houses in this, the older, part of the village had stables at the back. Few of them were used as such nowadays, though. Some had become garages, others, like the Pringles,' were only storehouses for worn-out things. But the Daleys' stable had found a third use. Across the front, above the wide-open carriage-room doorway, ran a large sign of black letters on a white ground:

JOHN H. DALEY

CARPENTER & CONTRACTOR

Through the doorway Pud could see the end of a long bench, the smooth planks lying on hanging racks above, the carpet of sweet-smelling shavings underfoot. He could also see a stocky boy of his own age leaning against an end of the bench and whittling something from a piece of soft pine. The boy was hatless, and a shaft of sunlight brought out the copper tones of his tousled hair. Pud watched rather enviously. Tim Daley's knife was so keen that it went into the wood as if the latter was no more than cheese. Tim could do almost anything with a knife, and Pud couldn't do much more than cut himself. Tim looked up from his occupation and straight across to the Pringles' back porch. The eyes of the boys met full for an instant. Then Pud swiftly moved his gaze

to the sky and Tim returned his to his knife. Then Tim began to whistle softly. Pud heard the tune and frowned. He wanted very much to squirm through the hole in the fence where the two pickets were broken and spend the rest of the time before dinner over there with Tim. And he would if only Tim would speak first. But Tim went on whistling and whittling and Pud's dissatisfaction with life increased.

He had to think hard to recall what he and Tim had quarreled about yesterday afternoon and was surprised to find how small a thing it had been. Tim had insisted that a carpenter and contractor had to know more than a newspaper proprietor and editor, and Pud had taken the other end of the argument. Tim, you see, had already determined to follow in his father's steps and Pud had already decided to become a newspaper man like his dad. In the heat of the argument things had been said that stung, and finally the two had parted, hurling recriminations at each other across the fence. Already the coldness had lasted longer than any previous breach of their friendship, and Pud was convinced that the time for reconciliation was already past, but — and here he let the screen door slam behind him vehemently — he'd be jiggered if he'd speak first!

After dinner was over and he had helped his

mother with the few dishes, without, for once, having to be commanded, he sauntered carelessly into the dining-room and from there to the parlor. For a minute he gazed out into the shade-mottled glare of the street, whistling loudly. Presently, though, the whistling ceased and, with a furtive glance toward the kitchen, he eased himself noiselessly into the hall, out the front door, and onto the porch. Then he made his way quietly around the farther side of the house, and, keeping close to the tangle of bushes that hid the high board fence dividing their yard from the Kepharts' he gained the stable door and, glancing once more toward the kitchen, disappeared from view.

It was fairly cool in the stable until he had creakingly ascended the narrow stairway to the loft. Up there the heat was almost discouraging. But the sun had moved away from the end window, and, seated on a dilapidated buggy cushion close to the casement, it was possible to get an occasional breath of air. The loft held Pud's most precious belongings; his printing-press, his patent exerciser, Indian clubs, roller skates, old games, and a valuable miscellany of treasures. This was Pud's *sanc-tum sanctorum*, his office, playroom, and harbor of refuge. There was an unwritten law, rigidly respected by Mr. and Mrs. Pringle, that pro-

hibited grown-ups from ascending the stairway beyond the turn.

Pud's library occupied a shelf beside the window. It came very near to being a five-foot library owing to the inclusion of all his school-books of earlier years. Pud had inherited respect for all things printed and could never be induced to throw away a book, no matter how ancient or worn. There were new books as well as old ones, however, and the new ones ran to sensational adventure. The newest of all, which Pud, having settled himself comfortably, took from the shelf, was 'The Pirates of the Caribbean,' the property, as emphatically set forth inside the cover, of The Millville Free Public Library. For a few moments he listened for the slam of the front gate, and then, as Mr. Tully's promise seemed to have been forgotten, he heaved a sigh of relief and, sliding lower onto his spine, placed his right knee over his left and in a jiffy was far away on tropical seas, swinging a cutlass with the best of them!

But, although Pud didn't know it then, Mr. Tully did call, and with the result that when Pud's father returned from a trip to a neighboring town at about five o'clock, there ensued a sober conference on the front porch in the course of which Pud's mother said: 'I think he

reads too many improbable stories, Anson, and sees far too many sensational moving pictures. He ought to be outdoors more and not spend so much of his time in the stable loft. Now that school is over, it will be worse than ever. I do wish we could send him to a summer camp, but that would be too expensive, I suppose.'

'It would,' agreed Mr. Pringle promptly and emphatically, 'but it's just possible that we can think of something else, Mary. Now . . . let . . . me . . . see.'

CHAPTER II

FRIENDS MAKE UP

‘OH, Tim!’

Pud, his scuffed shoes wedged between the pickets, leaned across the fence and hailed his neighbor excitedly. But Tim, his back turned, was propelling the lawn-mower along the edge of the grass-plot in front of the house, and the strident chatter of the machine deafened him to the hail. Pud took a deeper breath and tried again. This time he almost threw himself from the fence.

‘Tim! Tim Daley!’

Tim heard, turned, looked, and stopped the mower.

‘Hello,’ he replied cautiously, and mopped his heated brow with the back of his hand.

‘Say, Tim, want to go with me and be a pirate?’

‘Huh?’ Tim relinquished the handle of the mower and approached the fence. It was evident by now that friendly relations were re-established, and his good-looking countenance held a smile that mingled delight with sheepishness. But Pud had forgotten for the moment

all about the recent estrangement, and as Tim drew near he went on gleefully:

‘Want to be a pirate and sail down the river in dad’s motor-boat and camp out at night and —’

‘Your dad hasn’t got any motor-boat,’ responded Tim.

‘He has, too! He got it last fall in trade with a fellow who owed him some money. Don’t you remember? It’s down at Mr. Tremble’s yard. He’s going to let me take it and go off on a trip. You’re going, too, Tim, and we’re going to be pirates of the Caribbean! We’re going to have a tent and a lot of food and dad’s going to have Mr. Tremble teach us to run it!’

‘The tent?’ asked Tim puzzledly.

‘The boat, you chump! We’re going to start next Monday. Want to come?’ Pud paused anxiously.

‘Why, I guess so,’ answered Tim, ‘only I don’t know will father let me, Pud.’

‘Why not? Why won’t he let you?’

‘He says —’ Tim hesitated at the possibility of hurting his chum’s feelings. ‘He says you take too many risks.’

Pud stared, stricken to silence by such an outrageous accusation. ‘Risks!’ he finally ejaculated. ‘How do you mean risks? I ain’t any riskier than — he is!’

'Well, you know,' answered Tim placatingly, 'we did get in a fix last winter on the ice that time.'

'What of it? What's he want to blame me for? How was I going to know that that old hunk was going to break loose like that? Gee, you'd think I'd done it on purpose, the way you talk!'

'I don't talk,' denied Tim vigorously. 'I only said what father said. Anyway, if you hadn't insisted on going out there that day we wouldn't have been there when it did break away. I told you it wasn't safe.'

'Shucks! A lot you knew about it! Besides, we got off all right, didn't we?'

'Y-yes, but they had to chase us way down below the bridge, and if we'd hit one of the piers —'

'"If"! Well, we didn't. Gee, if you don't want to go, just say so. I guess I can find some one else. Most fellows would jump at the chance to go off a whole week in a corking boat and camp out at night and cook their own grub and —'

'Who's going to cook it?' demanded Tim.

'Both of us. Or we could take turns. I don't mind cooking a bit. Anyway, we'd just have bacon and easy things like that.'

'I don't like bacon,' said Tim coldly.

'Well, you wouldn't *have* to eat it, I guess. Gee, you can think up more — more objections!'

'I can't either! Only I don't like to cook, and if I have to do it I'd rather not go. Couldn't we take things that didn't have to be cooked?'

'Sure! That's easy.' Pud's cheerfulness returned. 'We can take things in cans, like corn-beef and — and —'

'Frankfurters,' suggested Tim.

Pud scowled. 'Gee, no, they're awful, Tim!'

'I like them,' said Tim placidly. 'And then there's beans.'

'Yes, beans are all right. And canned tomatoes and corn —'

'And peaches,' added Tim wistfully.

'Well, I guess peaches are pretty expensive. Say, had your breakfast?'

'Yes. You?'

Pud nodded. 'Let's go and ask your father if you can come with me, Tim. Will you?'

'He's working on a job over across the creek,' answered the other doubtfully.

'Well, why not ask him right now? We'll both go, eh?'

Tim looked at the mower. 'I ought to get this grass cut,' he muttered.

'Gosh!' exploded Pud. 'How long's that

going to take, I'd like to know. You — you're a rotten pirate!

'I never said I was a pirate,' replied Tim equably. 'But if father comes home and finds I haven't cut the grass he will be madder'n a hornet.'

'That's all right. When we come back I'll get our mower and help you.'

Tim considered and finally agreed, and a minute later they were going side by side along Arundel Street. 'How'd your father come to say you could do it?' asked Tim.

'He and ma think I ought to be outdoors more,' replied Pud evasively. Tim was about to seek further enlightenment when Pud suddenly stopped short.

'Gee!' he exclaimed. 'There's Harmon Johnson!'

'What of it?' demanded Tim, pulling away from his friend's clutching fingers.

'What of it! Why, don't you see?' Pud's voice, lowered to a hoarse whisper, was exultant. 'Pirates always have a black man to cook for 'em. We'll get Harmon to come along!'

'No, we won't either! I'm not going to sleep with any negro!'

'Who's asking you to sleep with him?' inquired Pud impatiently. 'He can sleep outside,

can't he? And he can do all the cooking and wash the dishes and — and everything.'

'How do you know he can cook?'

'All colored folks can cook. Anyway, I guess he can do it as well as you or I can.'

'Yes, that's so.'

The object of their remarks approached un-hurriedly. He was a year younger than Pud and Tim, but he looked older. He was very black, with a round and solemn countenance and a broad-shouldered, sturdy body. His father worked in the chair factory and his mother was locally famed as a laundress of more than ordinary skill. They lived in Log-town, the community of cabins clustered along the nearer bank of Town Creek. Harmon when not in school worked variously as delivery boy, messenger, assistant washer at Floyd's Garage and chore-boy for any one who required his services. Just now, shuffling along on dusty bare feet, he appeared to be out of employment.

'Hello, Harmon,' greeted Pud genially.

'Hello,' returned Harmon, coming to a halt in front of them and resting a gravely questioning gaze on Pud.

'Say, Harmon, want to go on a cruise in a motor-boat with us?'

Harmon nodded unemotionally. He didn't know what Pud meant, but it sounded as though

there might be a quarter or maybe a half-dollar in it. 'When you-all want me to do it?' he inquired.

'We're going to start next Monday,' replied Pud importantly.

Harmon nodded again and started on. 'I reckon I can 'tend to it for you,' he assured them. 'I usually gets half a dollar,' he added.

'Hold on! You don't understand, Harmon. You — you don't get anything for it.'

'How-come?' Harmon looked slightly derisive.

Pud, assisted by Tim, explained at length and with great detail that this was not a business matter, that, on the contrary, they were proposing to allow Harmon to share in a whole week of idle enjoyment, with plenty to eat and nothing to do — much.

'Who cooks all these rations you tell about?' asked the darky at last.

'Why —' Pud's gaze wandered to the distant horizon — 'any of us. You could if you liked, Harmon.'

Harmon wiggled five toes against the dirt and observed them thoughtfully. Pud and Tim exchanged anxious glances.

'I get my meals for nothin', don' I?' Harmon inquired.

'Sure! And a bed to sleep in — that is, a —

a place to sleep; and nothing to do but have a good time!

Harmon's face lighted slowly and two rows of white teeth flashed. 'Can I run the boat sometimes?' he asked.

'Of course you can,' said Pud magnanimously. 'And steer it, too.'

'All right,' decided Harmon. 'You tell me when you want me an' I'll be there.'

'That's fine,' declared Tim, 'but what about your father, Harmon? Or your mother? Think they'll let you go?'

Harmon nodded untroubledly. 'Boun' to,' he said.

The boys continued their journey elatedly. 'I didn't say anything about being pirates,' explained Pud, 'because I didn't want to scare him. Maybe he wouldn't want to go if he knew. Darkies are awfully scarey, you know.'

'Say, wait a minute,' exclaimed Tim suspiciously. 'What's all this about being pirates? What do you mean pirates?'

'Why, you know what a pirate is, don't you?' replied Pud evasively.

'Sure, but there aren't any pirates these days, so how can we be them?'

'Aren't any pirates, eh?' said Pud derisively. 'I guess you don't know much about them. Didn't you ever hear of river pirates?'

Tim shook his head. 'I've heard of oyster pirates.'

'Huh, they ain't real pirates. River pirates are just like the pirates of the Caribbean. That's what we're going to be.'

'What do we do?' asked Tim uneasily.

'Why, we — well, we just be pirates! Of course we don't murder folks, but we — we do other things.'

'Such as what?' persisted his chum.

'Well —' Pud's gaze became far-away and sort of glassy. 'Maybe we'll sack a town and carry off its treasures. And board a merchant craft and capture her. And hang the captain to the —'

'Rats!' said Tim. 'You can't hang a man without murdering him, can you? All right, I'll be a pirate of the Cabirean, just as long as it's only play —'

'Caribbean, you idiot. And it isn't only play, either. At least, not — well, you never know what's going to happen!' And Pud stared darkly into the muddy waters of Town Creek as they tramped across the foot-bridge.

Mr. Daley was surprisingly complaisant when they found him. He was a tall, large-boned man with only a trace of the Irish in features and talk. He stopped planing down

the edge of a board while Tim and Pud explained the nature of their errand and observed them with deep-set, kindly gray eyes. 'Why, now,' he said at last, 'it's mighty kind of your father, Pud, and I guess Tim would enjoy it fine. You'd be gone no more'n a week, eh? Well, I'll be missing the boy, but that's nothing if he wants to go. But I'm warning you fair, Tim, if you get drowned, I'll whale the life out of you so soon's I get my hands on you!'

Back at Tim's house, they set to work on the lawn and the side yard, and for nearly an hour the two mowers droned in the hot sunlight of mid-forenoon. At last the work was done and the machines put away and the boys found a shaded spot under a big maple in Tim's yard and went to planning. Tim's enthusiasm was now equal quite to Pud's as, pencil in hand, he set down item after item on a short length of clean white pine board.

'Golly,' he said, having corrected 'beens' to 'beans' at the bottom of the long list, 'I wish we were going to-morrow, Pud, instead of Monday!'

'So do I.' Pud's tone held an emphasis that brought an inquiring look from his companion. 'I've got to do a lot of work before Monday,' Pud sighed. 'You see — say, I didn't tell you about Mr. Tully, the Baptist minister, did I?

That was yesterday, and — and I didn't see you yesterday,' Pud ended hastily.

'What about him?' demanded Tim eagerly.

So Pud narrated the event and its results, Tim chuckling wickedly at times. The finish of the tale held little of humor, though. 'Dad gave me fits,' said Pud moodily. 'Made me promise not to do it again and said I had to apologize to Mr. Tully.'

'Did you?' inquired Tim interestedly.

Pud shook his head. 'Not yet. I'm going to after dinner.'

'Oh, that isn't so bad.'

'But that isn't all of it,' responded the other sadly. 'I've got to go to dad's office to-morrow and Saturday and help fold a lot of circulars; 'most four thousand of them. He said that was for punishment. Gee, I hate folding circulars!'

'Four thousand!' Tim whistled expressively. 'You got to do them all?'

'No, I don't suppose so. He said I was to help Jimmy, one of the men in the shop. But I'll bet I'll have to do most of 'em!'

'And that's why we can't start till Monday?'

'Yes. And if they aren't all done, we can't get going even then!'

There was silence under the elm. Then Tim asked: 'Is it hard? Folding circulars, I mean.'

'No, it ain't hard,' answered Pud despond-

ently, 'but it's awful monotonous. You just fold 'em so' — he illustrated sketchily — 'and crease 'em with a wooden ruler, so' — a second illustration — 'and then you do it again, and that's all.'

'Could I do it, Pud?'

Pud looked across swiftly, his brown eyes lighting as if they saw a wonderful vision. 'Sure!' he cried.

'All right, then,' said Tim, 'I'll help you.'

Pud nodded radiantly. Then his face sobered and his gaze dropped and another silence held for a moment. Finally, 'Say, Tim,' he muttered, 'I guess maybe I was wrong the other day about you having to know more to be an editor than to be a contractor.'

'Oh, shut up,' said Tim testily. 'You weren't either. What'll I put down after "beans"?''

CHAPTER III

THE KISMET STARTS ON HER VOYAGE

SHOVE her off there!'

The captain of the launch *Kismet* gave the order in a fine, gruff, sailor-like voice as he pulled the throttle a trifle wider. The deck-hand, seated on the edge of the scanty after deck, set two bare feet against the float and pushed hard. The mate gripped the wheel tightly, fixed anxious blue eyes on the stern of a lumber schooner fully ten fathoms away and hoped for the best. The launch's nose swung slowly into the stream, the captain pulled back on the clutch lever and there ensued a clattering, jarring noise that caused the deck-hand very nearly to lose his balance and go overboard. Then the alarming sounds ceased and the *Kismet* lurched forward. The mate saw, with vast relief, that a collision with the schooner was averted — by the narrow margin of some forty feet — and dared a backward look at the dock where his father and Pud's father and bow-legged Andy Tremble were gathered to see them off. They were waving and calling, and Tim waved and shouted back.

So did Pud. Harmon only showed a flash of white teeth. There was no one there to say good-bye to Harmon, but he didn't seem to mind. The launch straightened out in the middle of the river and pointed her bow for the bridge. The figures on the boat-yard float receded and were presently lost to sight. Captain and mate exchanged a look of triumph. The voyage had begun!

Presently there ensued an anxious period when, the little two-cylinder engine throttled down and Pud and Tim both at the wheel, the *Kismet* negotiated the passage under the long bridge. The space looked alarmingly narrow as they approached, but once in the shadows of the ancient timbers there was room and to spare on each side, and almost nonchalantly Pud opened her up again. As they passed again into the sunlight Gus Miller's station jitney rattled across and Gus waved down to them. Pud returned the salutation with all the dignity of the captain of an ocean liner waving from her bridge. The railroad station went slowly astern and a long line of box cars on the siding followed. The water tower on Coop's Hill was all that remained in view of Millville now. On their left a red clay bank arose to the edge of the meadows. On their right trees and bushes marched straight down to the gently flowing

water. Pud gave a sigh of great contentment.

‘Some little craft, Tim,’ he said.

‘Sure is,’ agreed Tim. ‘Say, it ain’t hard to steer, is it, when you get used to it?’

‘N-no, not here,’ answered Pud, ‘but you wait till she gets in a sea!’

‘How do you mean sea?’ asked Tim anxiously. ‘Where are we going to get in any sea?’

‘Well, I guess this old river can kick up pretty mean lower down,’ said Pud. ‘Take it around Mumford, Tim, and it’s ’most a mile wide.’

‘Mumford! Gosh, we ain’t going that far. Why Mumford’s forty miles, pretty near, by river.’

‘What of it? This old cruiser’s doing five miles right now, I guess, and it would only take us eight hours to get to Mumford, wouldn’t it? Why, we could get as far as that to-day if we wanted to!’

‘Well, but you said we were going to just cruise and take it easy. You said we’d go up Fox River a way and explore. You didn’t say anything about Mumford, and I’ll tell you right now I ain’t going to take any chances!’

‘Pshaw, who’s asking you to? Why, this boat’s a mighty safe old craft, I tell you. I guess I wouldn’t be afraid to go right out into the sound in her.’

'Well, you can go alone,' answered Tim decidedly. 'When you get ready to do that, just you dump me and Harmon ashore.'

'I'll bet Harmon wouldn't be scared to go, would you, Harmon?'

'Where's 'at?' asked the darky, who, since leaving the float, had been watching the engine in grave fascination.

'Out in the sound. You wouldn't be afraid, would you?'

'What kind o' sound?'

'Why, the ocean down at the mouth of the river.'

'I ain' never heerd no sound yet I's scared of,' replied Harmon calmly.

Tim laughed. Pud, about to make the matter clear, was interrupted by a sudden grinding and thumping from aft the engine and hurried off. When you put the clutch lever back on the *Kismet*, you had to engage it with a little wire hook or else it slipped back into neutral. Pud knew this, but in the excitement of getting away had forgotten it. Now he remedied the matter and returned to the bow, but not to the recent subject of discourse. A man fishing from a flat-bottomed punt just ahead and a few yards from the shore claimed his interest. To see if the man had had any luck, Pud turned the launch toward the punt.

‘Catching anything?’ he called as the *Kismet* waddled past a few yards distant.

A red and irate countenance turned toward them and the disciple of Izaak Walton gestured fiercely with the hand that wasn’t busy with his pole. ‘You consarned whippersnappers,’ he yelled, ‘ain’t you got no sense at all? What do you mean acomin’ over here and scarin’ all the fish away? If I had ahold of you a minute I’d teach you some sense, you dog-gone, low-down trash! I’d show you who was catchin’ anythin’! I’d plumb wear you out, dod-bust you! I’d —’

The *Kismet* passed from hearing, but back up the stream the angry gentleman still shook his fist at them. Pud and Tim looked a bit chastened, but the usually solemn Harmon was doubled over with mirth.

‘Yeah, yeah!’ he gurgled. ‘Old Mister Man certainly was talkin’ fine! Lawsy, lawsy! My golly, wan’t he angrified?’

‘Huh,’ said Pud, ‘I don’t believe he ever caught anything there, anyway, the old grouch!’

After a minute Tim asked wistfully: ‘Where do we stop for dinner, Pud?’

‘Dinner? Gee, it’s only a little after ten! Didn’t you eat any breakfast?’

‘Not much,’ acknowledged Tim. ‘I guess I was too excited.’

‘Hm, well, I guess I was, too. Just the same, we hadn’t ought to have dinner before twelve; or, maybe, half-past eleven.’

‘N-no, but thinking about it sort of helps,’ murmured Tim.

It got pretty warm on the river as the sun moved toward the zenith and both Pud and Tim began to look longingly at the occasional shady places they passed. Harmon lay flat on his back on the stern seat, one bare black arm across his eyes, utterly motionless, silent and contented. They chugged past Farquhar’s Landing with its half-dozen scattered houses and gazed back regretfully at the broad oaks that lined the single street. Ahead of them lay a long stretch of open stream, sun-smitten, its banks barren of shade. Pud consulted his silver watch and announced casually: ‘’Most quarter-past eleven. Guess we might as well stop at the next place that looks good, Tim. Won’t do to overheat the engine.’

‘What about me getting overheated?’ grumbled Tim. ‘Anyway, there isn’t any place in sight, and by the time we get to one, I’ll be fried as hard as an egg.’

‘I guess it isn’t any hotter for you than it is for me,’ said Pud. ‘Looks like there were trees down beyond that bend, don’t it?’

Tim agreed that it did sort of look that way,

and a quarter of an hour later the *Kismet* sidled up to the shore at the right where a straggling grove of trees had taken possession of one corner of a field. Although the launch drew only about eighteen inches, they couldn't get her nose close enough to land dry-shod, and so Harmon waded ashore with the bowline and made it fast to the bole of a willow. Then he pushed a log out toward the launch and Tim got ashore on it without wetting more than one foot slightly. It was decided to be much too hot to do any cooking, so Pud selected a box of crackers, a can of potted ham, six bananas, and three bottles of lemon tonic from the larder and carefully tossed the articles one by one across the intervening space of mud and water to Tim. Everything got over safely except one of the bottles, and Harmon rescued that. Having turned off the gasoline at the tank according to instructions from Andy Tremble, Pud set out to join the others. Perhaps the current had slightly misplaced the log. Anyhow, Pud felt the water creeping about one ankle, gave a startled exclamation and advanced his other foot hurriedly with the result that he stepped on the side of the log and — Oh, well, what finally happened was that Pud sat squarely down in three inches of water!

To his credit it is here related that he didn't

get angry. After an instant of surprise and dismay, he accepted the misadventure as an excellent joke and laughed so hard that it required aid from the grinning Tim to get him to his feet. Harmon was rolling about on the ground, convulsed with joy. Laughter cleared the atmosphere considerably. The heat on the river had commenced to make both Pud and Tim somewhat testy. Pud ate his lunch with no more on than his underclothes. The costume was sufficient for the occasion, and Tim envied him until the mosquitoes learned of their arrival and kept Pud so busy slapping that he scarcely had time to eat. Things tasted pretty good, although the tonic would have been more satisfying if it hadn't been rather more than lukewarm. When the none too hearty repast was finished to the last crumb, Harmon was dispatched first to the launch for the lard-pail that was to do duty as a water bucket and then up the hill in the hot noonday sunshine in search of a well or a spring. The river water was too warm to drink. When Harmon had uncomplainingly departed, the others provided themselves with branches with which to fight the mosquitoes and made themselves comfortable. A few yards away the launch rubbed her sides against a snag and looked, as Pud proudly observed, 'pretty good.'

The *Kismet* was twenty-and-a-half feet long and six feet wide, proportions that made less for speed than comfort and safety. She was open all the way from her short forward deck to her even shorter after deck. The engine was placed amidship. A seat extended across the stern and along either side. Two folding canvas stools were also provided. The seats had lockers under them, and there was a locker beneath the stern decking and a space at the bow pretty much taken up by the gasoline tank. The *Kismet* had been painted buff to the water-line and white above it, but the white had long since turned to drab. There hadn't been time to repaint the launch, even had Mr. Pringle decided to go to the expense. All that Andy Tremble, in whose boat-yard the *Kismet* had lain since the previous fall, had been able to do was use a scrubbing brush on the paint and varnish and overhaul the engine. The latter badly needed a coat of enamel, but in lieu of that Andy had doused it well with cylinder oil, and for quite three days it looked fairly decent. After that it went back to its former hues of rusty red and yellow.

The lockers were all filled to capacity, for both Pud and Tim had found it necessary to take along a great many things not usually considered essential to such a voyage. Harmon

alone had arrived in light marching order, his effects consisting principally of a blue cotton shirt and a mouth-organ. Mrs. Pringle had censored the boys' list of rations with a stern hand, and when she had finished Pud had voiced the dismal prophecy that he and Tim — not to mention Harmon — would undoubtedly starve to death long before the week was up. Mrs. Pringle had supplied the larder with essentials only, although at the last moment she had consented to two dozen bottles of tonic and had added a cake of her own baking. Pud had supplied a dozen bananas and Tim had thoughtfully bought five bars of chocolate not too generously studded with almonds. Mr. Pringle had dug out his camping outfit in the garret: an 'A' tent, slightly mildewed but whole, two folding canvas cots, a folding stove, an aluminum cooking-kit, and a carbide lantern, and Mrs. Pringle had provided blankets, towels, a great deal more soap than Pud considered necessary, several tin plates and cups and various other impedimenta. Pud and Tim had each taken a change of clothes, swimming trunks, a sweater, and a rubber coat; and at the last moment Tim had scurried home to get a gray flannel shirt!

Both boys had taken a wealth of fishing paraphernalia, including a can of worms; Pud had put in his camera; Tim had bought a base-

ball and catcher's mitten; Pud had provided an ancient musket that had lain in the attic for many years and hadn't been used for nearly a century; Tim had fetched almost a complete set of tools selected from his father's discarded implements; and there were numerous other items besides, many of which never emerged from the lockers until the *Kismet* was back in her home port. One of such was an automobile horn that Tim had traded for with Lee Stiles, Egbert Stiles's cousin. It made a perfectly glorious howl when you punched down on it, and Tim thought it would be a fine thing to mount it on the launch's bow and blow it when they met other boats, but he forgot all about it afterward.

All these things severely taxed the capacity of the storage space. In fact, the tent and the cots and the cooking-utensils, which lived in a canvas bag when not in use, had to lie in the forward compartment and were forever being stumbled over. So, too, with the box of tonic and a peck of potatoes in a paper sack, neither of which would accommodate themselves to a locker. After the first rain the potatoes burst the sack and it became one of Harmon's daily duties to rout them out from unexpected places and herd them together again. There was, also, a boat-hook which seemed to have no real

home and which was always lying on the floor where you could easiest put an unwary foot on it. After Pud and Tim had each narrowly escaped broken limbs as a result of stepping on the pesky thing and Pud had exasperatedly threatened to heave it overboard, Harmon cleverly solved the difficulty by tying a line to it and dropping it over the side. There were times when they might have made use of it if it had been handy, but it wasn't and they got on very nicely without it.

I think that's all the description the *Kismet* merits. Perhaps I should add that an empty flagpole leaned rakishly from a brass socket at the stern and that the boat's name, done in black letters, could still be plainly read on each side of the bow. So much, then, for the craft, and now let us return to the crew.

CHAPTER IV

UNDER THE SKULL-AND-CROSS-BONES

'I WISH he'd hurry up with that water,' muttered Tim, his hands under his head, his straw hat pulled over his forehead, and the rest of his countenance obscured by the wilted leaves of the maple branch which he had thrust between the buttons of his shirt. Pud, cross-legged, a grass-blade between his teeth and a ruminative look on his face, answered absently,

'Maybe he will.'

It was getting along toward one o'clock now, and thrice they had had to shift their positions to keep the tree boughs between them and the glowing sun. There was a faint breath of air creeping down the long green slope behind them which to some extent made existence more bearable. At least, it gave them a slight advantage over the mosquitoes.

'How far do you think we've come?' asked Tim after a minute of silence.

Pud aroused himself from his abstraction and uncrossed his cramped legs.

'Let's see, Farquhar's is eight miles, isn't

it? And I guess we're a couple of miles beyond that. Say, ten miles in an hour and three quarters is going some, Tim! Why, we must have made six miles an hour, and Mr. Tremble said she wouldn't do better than five!'

'Well, don't you suppose the current helped some?'

'Gee, that's so. Maybe it did, though it isn't very strong. Yes, I guess it must have.'

'How much farther do you think we'll go to-day?' Tim sounded sleepy.

'Oh, I guess we'll make the railroad bridge at Livermore,' responded Pud a trifle uncertainly. 'That's only about another ten miles, and I dare say there'll be a good camping-place there.'

'You ever been there?' .

'Sure.'

'By river, I mean.'

'No, not by river. I've never been beyond Farquhar's by river, but I've been to Livermore by train.'

'We'd ought to have a map,' murmured Tim.

'What for? You can't get lost on a river, can you?'

'Well, they say you can get lost on Fox River. They say it sort of runs around in circles, and there's a lot of branches and creeks too.'

'You can't get lost on any river,' answered Pud decisively, 'because all you've got to do is follow the current and you'll come out of it.'

'Yeah, that's so,' agreed Tim. 'Just the same, I heard Father tell once how a couple of Revenue men went up there to Swamp Hole and were lost 'most a week.'

'Must have got into the woods, or the swamp then. Say, I guess that's a wild place, eh?'

'The Hole? Gosh, I wouldn't go near that place for a million dollars!'

'I would,' said Pud promptly. 'I'd like mighty well to see what it's like, wouldn't you? If you could get there without being seen, eh?'

But Tim shook his head. 'No, sir, I wouldn't. I guess the folks that live there would just as soon cut your throat as say "Howdy." They say there's folks living in Swamp Hole that ain't ever been outside it, Pud.'

'I guess a lot of 'em wouldn't dare come out,' chuckled Pud, 'for fear the sheriff would get 'em. I'm going to see if my clothes are dry.'

'Going to put them on?'

'Yes. Why?'

'I was thinking we might go in swimming.'

'Gee, why not? Want to?' Tim assented.

'All right, I'll get the trunks.'

Pud waded out to the launch, climbed aboard and began hunting through the lockers.

It took him a long time to find the articles, for, although when they had stored their belongings away, they had been quite certain they could put their hands on them again instantly, now he couldn't remember where a single thing was! When he had pulled most of the dunnage from one side of the boat, he was hot but triumphant and splashed back to shore with the bathing-trunks just as Harmon ambled into sight. The thought of a drink of cold water was so welcome that he didn't say a word about the time it had taken Harmon to do the errand. But when he had taken one gulp of the contents of the lard-pail he found his voice.

'For goodness' sake,' he exclaimed disgustedly, 'where'd you get that stuff? It's as warm as — as dish water!'

'Oh, gosh!' moaned Tim. 'Ain't it any good, Pud?'

'Well, you can drink it if you like. I won't. He never got that out of any well, I'll bet!'

'I did, too,' declared Harmon. 'I got it out of a gentleman that lives in a big white house's well. It was gran' and col', too, but I reckon it done got warmed up luggin' it back here, 'cause it's mos' of two miles.'

'Two miles! Gee!' Pud looked from the pail to Harmon. 'Well, I guess if you went two miles for it, we oughtn't to kick. Just the

same, it's too warm to drink. And my throat's as dry as — as —'

'So's mine,' said Tim.

'If you-all wants some col' water,' announced Harmon, 'I'll get you plenty of it.'

'Where?' asked Pud.

Harmon pointed to the bank of the river. 'Right yonder. I got to have me a shovel, though.'

'Gee, that's so. I never thought of that, Tim. All we've got to do is dig a hole back from the river a bit and let it fill up. But we haven't any shovel!'

'That's a fact,' owned Tim. 'And I thought we'd fetched everything we'd need, too!'

Harmon, though, was resourceful, for, lacking a shovel, he used a large iron spoon and, selecting a spot half a dozen feet from the edge of the water, soon had a hole dug. Anxiously, their tongues almost hanging out, the others watched the operation. From all sides of the tiny well water trickled in, but Tim viewed the muddy result distastefully. 'Gosh,' he said, 'I wouldn't drink that stuff! Why, it might poison me!'

'Hold your horses,' advised Pud. 'Wait till it settles.'

Harmon, though, baled out most of the first lot very carefully. Then the hole was allowed to fill once more, and while it settled, Pud and

Tim got into their swimming-trunks. By the time they were ready for the river, Harmon announced the water ready for drinking. He had got a tin cup from the launch and now he dipped it into the little reservoir and offered it to Tim. Tim looked at it, smelled it, and finally tasted it. Then he drank it at two gulps.

‘Gosh,’ he said, ‘that’s great! Cold, too!’

Well, it wasn’t exactly cold, but it was cool, and it was clear and sweet, and Harmon gravely filled the cup many times before their thirsts were satisfied. Then they went in swimming. Harmon had brought no bathing attire, but that trifling circumstance didn’t keep him out of the water, and long after Pud and Tim had had enough and were out again on the grass, sunning themselves dry, Harmon still paddled or floated idly about, the sunlight glinting on the wet ebony of his skin.

Having donned some of his clothes, Pud, invigorated by his bath, said he guessed it was time to fix up the launch. Tim wanted to know what he meant by ‘fix up’ and was requested to wait and see. Pud climbed into the launch, rummaged awhile and reappeared to view with two pieces of white oilcloth. Then he set about tacking one of them on the bow. Tim advanced to the edge of the water and watched curiously. The oblong of oilcloth, evidently

cut from a piece that had seen service on Mrs. Pringle's kitchen table, was adorned with the inscription, surprisingly well lettered in black paint, JOLLY RODGER. Several tacks and several whacks of the hammer secured the strip of oilcloth over the word *Kismet*, and, since the oilcloth was not particularly white any longer, at a distance of a few yards it appeared quite as though the new name was painted on the hull.

'How's it look?' demanded Pud triumphantly as he sent the last tack home and raised a flushed countenance to Tim.

'All right,' answered the other doubtfully, 'only —'

'Only what?'

'I never saw "Roger" spelled with a "d," Pud.'

'Why not? R-o-d, Rod, g-e-r, ger; Rodger. Isn't that right?'

Tim shook his head. 'There isn't any "d," Pud.'

Pud scratched his bare head sheepishly. Then he grinned. 'Oh, well, what's the diff? I guess lots of pirates didn't spell any better than I do! Look, here's the one for the other side.' He held up a second strip of oilcloth and Tim read VENGEANCE. This time he didn't have the heart to correct the spelling.

'Fine,' he said, 'but what's the idea of having different names?'

'Well, I couldn't decide which was the best. Besides, Tim, maybe it'll confuse the enemy.'

'Sure,' agreed the other gravely.

Harmon watched operations in solemn, uncomprehending silence, noiselessly spelling the word out. Pud's hammer tap-tapped for a minute and then there was nothing left to inform the beholder that this apparently piratical craft was in fact only the hitherto entirely respectable *Kismet*. But Pud wasn't through even yet. Next appeared what looked to have been part of a pillow-slip. This was decorated with a skull-and-cross-bones, none too successfully executed since the paint had run rather badly in places. It took Pud quite five minutes to get the thing tacked to the flagpole, and then, tossing down his hammer, he waded back to shore and stood for an equal length of time in rapt contemplation of the improvements. There wasn't nearly enough breeze blowing to display the gruesome emblem on the flag, but Pud seemed thoroughly satisfied, and even Tim was thrilled a little by the wicked appearance of the transformed launch. As for Harmon, curiosity at last got the better of him.

'What 'at flag for?' he asked.

'That's the pirate's flag,' Pud informed him.
'We're going to be pirates, Harmon.'

'Uh-huh. How we gets to be 'em?'

Pud winked at Tim and answered gravely:
'Oh, we kill folks and rob them, you know; run them down and scuttle their ships and cut off their heads and —'

You never could tell beforehand, it seemed, what would touch off Harmon's peculiar sense of humor. Now he dropped suddenly to the grass and writhed in uproarious delight. His teeth flashed and his eyes rolled and his bare heels beat a wild tattoo on the turf. For an instant the others were too surprised to do anything save stare. Pud, indeed, was a trifle chagrined that his explanation had failed to impress Harmon as he had meant it to. But there was no resisting the contagion of that laughter, and after a moment they joined in, their amusement occasioned, though, solely by Harmon's ridiculous antics. Harmon ceased almost as suddenly as he had begun and sat up, supported by widespread hands, and viewed them gravely. Pud conquered his mirth and demanded sternly:

'For goodness' sake, what's the matter with you, I'd like to know? What's funny about killing folks?'

Harmon was threatened with a relapse, but resisted it successfully. He only rolled his eyes

a little as he giggled: 'Ain' nothin'. I jus' laugh at the way you done tell it!'

And that was the nearest to an explanation he was capable of. Pud said 'Humph!' doubtfully. Then he added darkly: 'All right, but I guess you won't think it's so funny when we get to pirating right!'

Harmon accepted the rebuke docilely and without comment, and wandered away along the river. 'He's crazy,' muttered Pud, still slightly indignant. But when he met Tim's twinkling eyes, he had to smile again. They sat down once more in the shade and watched the ripples on the water and talked fitfully. After a while Pud looked at his watch. 'Gee,' he said, 'it's twenty past three!'

'Gosh,' murmured Tim, 'is it?'

'Yes.'

Then silence fell again between them. A kingfisher called stridently from the limb of a dead pine across the river and a fish broke the water with a splash. Then Harmon returned with his arms full of dry branches which he dropped noisily near by.

Pud sat up and stared inquiringly. 'What's that for?' he asked.

'Fire,' answered Harmon. 'Ain' you-all goin' to have no supper?'

'Sure, but we're not going to have it here,

you chump. At least' — he looked doubtfully at Tim — 'I don't suppose we are.'

Tim viewed the firewood, the sky, the river, and then Pud. 'Well, I don't know,' he answered slowly. 'This isn't such a bad place, is it?'

'N-no, it ain't. We could put the tent up over there; and we've got drinking water handy. I'm willing if you are.' Tim nodded lazily. 'All right, Harmon, we'll stay —'

But Harmon had gone again. Pud settled back and laid an arm over his eyes.

It was nearly five when he woke up. There was sound of faint, elfin music in his ears, and for a moment he couldn't think where he was. Then his drowsy eyes fell on the slumbering Tim a yard away, journeyed on and encountered, seated on the fallen trunk of a tree beside the river, the gently swaying form of Harmon, his mouth-organ at his lips. It was cooler now, for the sun was sinking toward the rim of distant forest and a little breeze ruffled the water. Pud yawned, stretched, sat up and shook Tim into wakefulness.

They were very busy for a while, for all sorts of things had to be transported from launch to land; cooking outfit, food, tent, cots, and a dozen other things at least. By six, Harmon, spurning the intricate camp stove they had

brought, had a fire going between two dead logs and had begun the preparation of the evening meal. Pud and Tim, seated near by, watched anxiously. As a cook Harmon was still an unknown quantity. But their anxiety didn't last long. Harmon didn't know how to cook many things, but within his limitations he was a master. The dexterous way in which he cracked the eggs on the rim of the fry-pan without losing a drop of their contents and then deposited the unseparated yolks and whites in exactly the right place in the sizzling grease brought a sigh of relief from Pud and an anticipatory gleam into Tim's blue eyes. After that they both ceased offering suggestions to the chef and just leaned back on their elbows and waited.

They called it supper, but it had all the indications of dinner. There were bacon and eggs and baked beans and bread and butter and tea and bananas and cake. They didn't need the bananas, perhaps, but Tim pointed out the undeniable fact that they were getting pretty soft and so they ate them to save them. After such a repast the job of putting up the tent didn't appeal to them, but it had to be performed. And there was no use of waiting for assistance from Harmon, either, for Harmon had plenty to do in washing up the dishes. So, rather half-

heartedly and with many protesting groans, they set about their task. Of course the guy-ropes were snarled and knotted, just as guy-ropes always are, and there were four pegs missing, and the ridgepole didn't want to fit onto the uprights. But they conquered in the end, and set the two cots up inside — although not before Tim had squeezed a finger painfully in the process — and made their beds. When they were done it was still daylight, although the sun was resting on the tips of the far-off pines. They cut some branches for Harmon and laid them on the ground at a short distance from the tent and then spread a blanket over them. Harmon, through with his duties, looked on rather dubiously.

'Spose a bear come along an' eat me,' he suggested finally.

'There aren't any bears around here,' said Pud reassuringly. 'Besides, all you've got to do is yell.'

'Yes, sir, I sure goin' do 'at,' he answered convincingly.

At sunset the breeze died down and the mosquitoes became troublesome once more. So they built up the fire and smudged it with green branches and damp wood and sat to leeward — when there was any leeward — and watched the light fade in the west and the

river turn from copper to steel and finally become lost to sight in the darkness. By request Harmon pulled his mouth-organ out of his trousers pocket and played his entire programme. The music cheered them up somewhat. Harmon could certainly make the instrument behave, as Pud phrased it! After that Pud introduced the subject of pirates and, his memory still fresh from his reading, told them weird and blood-thirsty tales that made even the narrator himself glance uneasily over his shoulder at intervals. Oddly enough, Harmon seemed utterly unaffected as to nerves. When Pud paused, the darky, staring round-eyed across the fire, begged for more. The more sanguinary the tales the better Harmon liked them, and when the cutlasses flew fastest and blood filled the scuppers, he voiced awed applause in murmured 'Lawsies!' or 'My gollies!' It was plain to be seen that Harmon was a born pirate! Indeed, it seemed regrettable that Morgan had lived too early to have the services of such a boon companion and kindred soul as Harmon Johnson!

'When we-all goin' start this here piratin', Mister Pud?' he asked finally.

'Oh, maybe to-morrow,' replied Pud, suppressing a yawn.

'Uh-huh. Reckon we's goin' sack a town, ain' we?'

'Well, we've got to find the town first,' chuckled Tim.

'Sure has,' agreed Harmon cheerfully. 'I goin' sharpen up 'at ol' carvin' knife to-morrow. Yes, sir, I goin' put a aidge on 'at ol' knife for sure! I ain' needin' no cutluss, Mister Tim, if I got me a good knife!' And Harmon swished an imaginary blade in a startlingly realistic manner.

'Guess you'd better go to bed,' growled Pud. 'And if I catch you sharpening any knives around here I'll skin you!'

Harmon accepted the rebuke meekly, although he was possibly slightly puzzled by it, and flashlights were snapped on and they sought their couches. Tim wanted to light the carbide lamp, but Pud said it would attract the mosquitoes, and so they did without it. After they were in bed and the two cots had ceased creaking, Tim heard a chuckle from across the darkness.

'What you laughing at?' he inquired.

'Harmon,' answered Pud. 'Bet you that boy's good and scared, eh? Bet you he's got his head under the blanket all right!'

Tim murmured assent. But a few minutes later, Pud changed his mind. From the direction of Harmon's lowly couch came loud, measured, and unmistakable evidences of slumber!

It might have been hours later or only minutes that Pud awoke startledly. From close by the tent a frightened voice was exclaiming, 'Oh, my golly! Oh, my golly! Where at's this here door? Oh, my —'

'What's the matter?' cried Tim, flouncing out of his cot.

'It's Harmon!' called Pud disgustedly. 'He's had nightmare, I guess. Harmon! Shut up that racket! Where are you?'

'Here I is! I can' find the door! Oh, my golly, Mister Pud, please, sir, you-all let me in there!' Then there was the sound of a stumbling body, the tent sagged and strained and Harmon fell in on his hands and knees, illumined by two flashlights. That something had frightened him half to death was plain, for his eyes were rolling and his teeth were chattering as he crawled to the nearest cot. 'Oh, lawsy, lawsy,' he sighed in relief.

'Say, what's your trouble?' demanded Pud, striving to quiet his own jangling nerves by speaking very sternly. Tim, still half asleep, waved his pocket torch vaguely about the tent, his mouth open in bewilderment.

'Mister Pud,' answered Harmon hoarsely, 'it was a-standin' right over me when I woke up and seed it! Look like it was tryin' to nuzzle the blanket offen me! My golly —'

'What was?' asked Pud.

'Yes, sir! Standin' right on top o' me, with its li'l' ol' eyes a-glarin' sort o' greenish an' its nose right close to my face! My golly! It was jus' a-goin' to bite me when I woke up!'

'Say, for goodness' sake! *What* was going to bite you?'

'*It* was!'

'Well, what was *it*?'

'That there varmint, Mister Pud! What I'm tellin' you about! The skunk!'

'Skunk!' echoed Pud and Tim in chorus. '*Skunk?*'

'Yes, sir, skunk! I seed the white stripes on him when he done run!'

'Gee!' chuckled Pud. 'A skunk! Why, a skunk wouldn't hurt you, Harmon! I guess you scared him a heap worse'n he scared you.'

'No, sir, I didn'! How-come he wouldn' harm me? Them things bite, Mister Pud!'

'Get out! Who ever heard of a skunk biting any one?'

'Besides,' laughed Tim, 'maybe it wasn't a skunk at all. Maybe it was only a pole-cat.'

But Harmon was in no mood for such niceties. 'Was you ever bit by a skunk, Mister Pud?' he asked earnestly.

'No, of course not.'

'Then how you know they don' bite?' demanded Harmon triumphantly.

'Why — why —' Pud felt that there was something utterly wrong with the other's logic, but he couldn't at the instant find the error, and Harmon continued with much conviction.

'That skunk would 'a' bit me for sure if I hadn' woke up! Please, can' I sleep in here, Mister Pud, with you-all? I's scared to go back out yonder.'

'Well,' began Pud hesitantly, glancing dubiously at Tim, 'I suppose —'

'Sure, he can,' asserted Tim, almost indignantly. 'Have a heart, Pud!'

Considering that it was Tim who had protested, a few days before, against any such arrangement as was now proposed, Pud felt that he was being put in rather a false position, but Harmon's fervently expressed delight drowned his sarcasm.

'I's certainly obliged,' declared the darky. 'Yes, sir! I'll jus' scrooch down here an' —'

'Without anything to lie on?' exclaimed Tim. 'Sakes alive, Harmon, go get your blanket!'

It was evident that Harmon had no desire to venture forth again into the skunk-infested night, but he finally went, flashing Tim's pocket torch on all sides and talking loudly to keep his courage up.

Ten minutes later quiet again reigned in the tent. Pud, seeking a more comfortable position on the unyielding canvas cot, smiled at a thought. 'That boy,' he reflected, 'might be an awful brave pirate, but he wouldn't make much of an animal trainer!'

CHAPTER V

THE CHICKEN THAT INTRUDED

THEY had made the mistake of pitching the tent where the morning sun had full play, and long before either Pud or Tim wanted to get up, the canvas walls were aglow, and it was only by hiding their faces under the blankets that they could keep the disturbing light from their eyes. Shortly before seven they capitulated. Harmon was already up and about. They could hear him cracking branches and crooning a song behind the tent. Outside, the grass was dew-spangled, and, in spite of the ardent sun, the air held a shivery quality that caused Tim to hesitate before accepting Pud's challenge to go for a swim. But he did accept, and they found the river far warmer than the air. By the time they were dried and dressed, Harmon was calling them to breakfast. For some moments a particularly delectable aroma had been pervading the tent, an aroma that suggested neither coffee nor bacon, and when they reached the fire the mystery was explained. In the fry-pan lay, crisply browned, what their astounded eyes could not mistake.

'Chicken!' they exclaimed in delighted chorus.

Harmon showed his teeth in the broadest of grins.

'But,' faltered Pud, after a moment of delicious contemplation, 'where — where'd it come from?'

Harmon chuckled. 'Who? This here chick'n? Ain' no tellin' where he come from, Mister Pud. He done walk right up and wink his eye at me, an' then he lay hisself right down in this here pan an' fol' his wings!'

'Yes, he did!' jeered Tim. 'I suppose he plucked his own feathers off, too!'

'Harmon,' said Pud sternly, 'you stole it!'

'No, sir, I never,' denied Harmon solemnly. 'I jus' pirated him!'

'Pirated him? Gee, that's a new name for it! Where'd you — where'd you "pirate" him?'

'Up yonder, beside the road. He certainly was the runnin'est li'l' rooster I ever seed! Yes, sir, I reckon his mother must 'a' been a ostridge! I chase 'at li'l' rascal —'

'You had no business to do it,' charged Pud severely. 'Want to get us all arrested? My goodness, that's no way to do, Harmon!'

'How-come? Ain' we pirates, Mister Pud? Didn' you say we-all was goin' sack towns?

Didn't you? How-come it's all right to sack a town an' ain' all right to sack a li'l' skinny rooster?'

Pud looked to Tim for assistance, but Tim was trying to keep his face straight, and he avoided Pud's eyes carefully. Harmon stared in solemn perplexity from one to the other.

Pud cleared his throat. 'Well, now, it's like this, Harmon,' he explained. 'I'm leader of this — this crew, and you ain't supposed to steal — sack anything, not even a chicken, until I tell you to. Understand?'

Harmon's face cleared and he nodded vigorously.

'All right. Now —' Pud looked longingly at the contents of the fry-pan — 'Now,' he went on in a failing voice, 'you'd better fry some bacon. It — it wouldn't be honest to eat that chicken, would it, Tim?'

Tim shook his head. It wasn't a decided shake, but it was the best he could do. Harmon voiced incredulity.

'You mean you-all don' want no chicken?' he ejaculated. 'My golly! How-come you ain' wantin' none?'

'Because we — because you stole it, Harmon,' answered Pud sadly. 'It wouldn't be right to —'

'Why you keep on sayin' I stole it? Ain' I

done tell you I "pirate" it? Lawsey, how-come you talk so silly?'

'Of course,' observed Tim, his gaze set fixedly on the charred tip of a chicken leg, 'you and I didn't steal it, Pud. And it's dead now, and it seems sort of wasteful to throw it away. Father says it's sinful to waste things, Pud.'

'Yeah, I know,' assented Pud. 'Well, maybe it wouldn't be very wrong if we ate it, just so's not to let it go to waste. I guess — I guess our consciences oughtn't to trouble us if we did. Of course, it's different with Harmon. He oughtn't to have any because he came by it dishonestly.'

'No,' agreed Tim. 'Still, if there was some left for him, it wouldn't be any affair of ours if he ate it. It would be between him and his conscience, I guess.'

'Yes, that's so.'

It was a wonderful chicken. Naturally, having been such a remarkable runner, it was inclined to be stringy and even a bit tough as to its legs, but they had good appetites and they were not restrained by ordinary table etiquette; and the toughest chicken leg that ever ran must yield its meat when you take it in both hands! They gave Harmon a share, although, of course, not the choice parts, and the darky seemed to have settled affairs with his con-

science very satisfactorily. At least, he gave every indication of enjoyment, and he did not, as he perhaps deserved to, choke to death on a bone!

By nine o'clock they were afloat again, and at half-past had left Bentonburg behind. The river was not so hot as it had been yesterday and voyaging was very pleasant. They chugged between wide fields that swept upward and away to tree-dotted horizons or to comfortable farm buildings, white against the blue sky. Harmon took his first lesson in steering and was visibly thrilled as the boat responded to his pressure on the little brass-bound wheel. In the first enthusiasm he almost ran them aground, and only Pud's quick action saved the day.

Pud rummaged around until he had found a pad of paper and five stamped and addressed envelopes held together by an elastic band. These had been supplied by his mother, with the injunction to send a letter every day. Pud had meant to send one yesterday, but he had forgotten. Now he placed a sheet of the paper on the lid of a box and, bidding Tim keep an eye on the helmsman, wrote as follows:

DEAR MOTHER AND FATHER:

We camped last night about two miles this side of Farquhar's Landing. Harmon is a fine cook. The

launch is doing finely. I guess we will make Livermore to-day and camp near the bridge. The cake was fine. We are all well and enjoying ourselves. Tim sends his respects.

Your loving son,

PUD

P.S. If we have time we might call on Aunt Sabrina like you said, but maybe we had ought to push on.

At noon they tied up alongside a tumble-down pier and ate a cold lunch. Breakfast had been hearty and sustaining, and it was decided that what cooking they did had best be done at the end of each day's voyage. As only some three miles lay between them and Livermore, there seemed no good reason to hurry, and so they lolled in the partial shade of the landing-pier for an hour and then went into the water. The glimpse of a fish sent Tim scurrying back to the launch for his tackle. The can of worms had, unfortunately, been overturned in such a way as to release most of the contents, but enough remained to bait three lines and for nearly two hours they all sat on the edge of the pier and sought to provide for the evening meal. But the fish wouldn't bite, and about four o'clock they cast off and went on again.

Livermore began a mile farther along with an outlying sprinkle of small farms on the left

of the river. These gave place to little houses set in tiny gardens and then to more ambitious residences. They caught the yellow gleam of a hurrying trolley car and heard its strident hum as it charged at a grade and went lurching out of sight behind the maples that lined the street. Harmon watched with intense interest, trolley cars being a novelty to him. A quarter of a mile of brick mill buildings marched beside them and the big steel bridge suddenly swept into sight around a bend of the stream. The river widened appreciably hereabouts and a long, pebbly island, decked with a few forlorn trees, divided the current. Pud, at the wheel now, chose the right-hand channel, slowing down the engine to a point where it coughed incessantly, but survived the secret malady. There was so much to see now — for Livermore boasted of a population of seventeen thousand and was a manufacturing town of some importance — that the three boys almost stared the eyes out of their heads. Harmon ejaculated 'Lawsey!' and 'My golly' at quite regular intervals. One thing that became plain long before the bridge was reached was that Pud's suggestion of camping thereabouts was not at all practical. The only place they could have pitched the tent would have been on some wharf!

'Guess we'll have to go on by the town,' said Pud. 'I didn't know it was all built-up like this!'

'Thought you said you'd been here,' said Tim.

'So I did and so I have.'

'Gosh, then I should think —'

'Well, it was quite a long time ago,' explained Pud; 'when I was about eight or nine. You see, Great-Aunt Sabrina lives over on the other side of town, and we don't usually get around here. I guess it's grown up a lot since I was here!'

'Your aunt at home now?' asked Tim, after a moment.

'Yes, I suppose so. She don't go about much. She's sort of old.' He turned hard apart to keep out of the way of a snorting tugboat that backed suddenly out from behind a pier.

'Well,' began Tim, after another brief silence.

But Pud interrupted, pointing to a conspicuous sign that adorned the end of a brick-red shed just ahead.

'Say, I guess we'd ought to have some more gasoline, eh?' he asked. 'We didn't have but thirty gallons when we started.'

'Well, gosh, I guess we ain't used any thirty

gallons,' demurred Tim. But Pud was already negotiating the landing.

'You, Harmon, you get up here and fend off,' he ordered. 'Keep her like that, Tim.' He went to the engine, anxiously watching the pier bear down upon them, and finally pushed the clutch forward. There was a fine churning under the stern, and Harmon's bare feet set themselves against the stringpiece and the *Jolly Rodger*, formerly the *Kismet*, sidled up to her berth. If the gasoline station had been on the other side of the river, the launch's name would have been the *Vengeance*, of course.

Investigation with a stick showed the gasoline tank to be still rather more than three quarters full, but since, by this time, the proprietor of the station was peering inquiringly down at them, Pud decided to purchase just the same.

'*Jolly Rodger*, eh?' said the man as he handed the nozzle of the hose down to them. 'What are you, pirates?'

Pud laughed evasively, but Harmon assented proudly. 'Yes, sir, we sure is! We's bloody pirates, Mister!'

'You look it!' laughed the man. 'Well, better not let the police see you, that's all I've got to say! How much do you want?'

Pud was very glad that he had yielded to Tim

that morning and consented to the removal of the skull-and-cross-bones at the stern! Suppose the police did see them and begin to ask questions! Suppose the man who had owned that chicken had sent word about its disappearance! He was mightily relieved when the gasoline was in and paid for, the cap screwed back on the tank, and the launch was again shoving her nose toward the bridge. His desire now was to leave Livermore behind and once more reach the open spaces. The others seemed not to share his uneasiness. They were craning their heads to see the bridge. Pud, back at the wheel, didn't have much time for sight-seeing, for the river held much traffic and he was kept busy. When they were directly under the bridge, which seemed an immeasurable height above them, but was probably no more than thirty feet, a trolley car rumbled across and Harmon's upturned face went two shades lighter. And when, at the same moment, from close by a mill whistle proclaimed five o'clock with a sudden and deafening shriek, poor Harmon nearly turned white!

'My golly!' he yelled. *'What's 'at?'*

Beyond the bridge and the press of river traffic, Tim returned to a former subject of conversation. 'Say, Pud, why don't you go and see your aunt? I should think you'd want to.'

'Huh? Oh, gee, she — she's awful sort of stern, Tim. I would go and see her only she lives quite a ways back.'

'I guess she'd be pretty hurt if she found out you'd been here and didn't call on her,' said Tim.

'Well —'

'And I guess she'd be likely to ask you to supper, wouldn't she? I and Harmon wouldn't mind if you went, Pud.'

'Yes, she'd ask me to supper, of course, but —'

'I guess you'd have a better supper than you would if you had what we have, eh? Preserves, probably, and cake.'

'Yes, she feeds a fellow great,' acknowledged Pud, a trifle wistfully. 'But I wouldn't go and have supper with her and leave you and Harmon — Say!' Pud was struck by a thought that had occurred to his chum long since. 'Say, why don't we all go?'

'Oh, well, maybe she wouldn't like it if I and Harmon were to butt in,' replied Tim doubtfully. 'She doesn't know us.'

'Well, gee, you're my friends, ain't you? Sure she'll like it. And — and I'd like it a sight better than going alone,' added Pud. 'I wouldn't wonder if she gave us cocoanut cake, Tim. She makes corking cocoanut cake! Gee, you just ought to taste it!'

‘We-ell, if you think it’ll be all right —’

‘Of course it will! Gee, Aunt Sabrina’s a — a little stern, and she sort of scares you if you don’t know her, but she don’t believe in turning folks away hungry; especially if they’re relatives — or relatives’ friends. We’ll find a good place to leave the launch and get a street car that’ll take us out Moorehouse Avenue. It’s only four or five blocks from the car line. Say, how about shoving in over there?’

Pud indicated an unoccupied berth between two short piers across the river. A warehouse loomed beyond it, its windows shuttered. Tim looked and approved and Pud turned the launch’s nose across the stream. When they reached the place, it didn’t look so inviting, for it was half out of water, exposing an evil-smelling slope of black mud. But it seemed a safe spot in which to leave the launch and their belongings, since, as Tim pointed out, the only way to reach it was to climb over a fence that gave onto a narrow alley. So they made the boat fast, stowed everything into the lockers that would go there, covered the engine with a piece of tarpaulin, and shinned up a spile to the rickety wharf above. After that they climbed the fence, followed the alley to its junction with a cobbled street, and set forth in search of Aunt Sabrina.

CHAPTER VI

AUNT SABRINA DOESN'T ANSWER

IT was nearly seven o'clock when they at last reached their destination. This was because, although they twice asked directions, they never did find Moorehouse Avenue. Since, in the course of their search, they kept on in a general northerly direction, they eventually came to Aunt Sabrina's street, and there Pud turned them back toward the river and so led them to the house. During the journey the sight of a letter-box reminded Pud that his missive to his parents still reposed in his jacket pocket, and he posted it.

Aunt Sabrina Puddlestone's residence occupied an entire block of land in a part of Livermore where, some thirty years before, it had been the custom for families to set their big houses in the middle of a block, and feel, even then, just a bit crowded. Now, since the town had grown in other directions, many of these old residences still stood unchallenged in the midst of their wide lawns, although frequently the houses themselves were down-at-the-heels. Aunt Sabrina's house, though, showed no signs

of disrepair. It was large and square, two stories in height, with a little square box set atop, as though the builder had wondered how a third story would look and had set it there to give him an idea. The little box was called 'The Tower' and was a mass of narrow windows on all sides. There was something extremely, almost depressingly, respectable about the Puddlestone mansion. It was so uncompromisingly angular and unadorned and white, and the the big downstairs windows were so immaculate in their heavy white curtains, and the front door, with its fan-light and side-lights, looked down across the front lawn with such a suspicious air that — well, Tim, viewing it for the first time, regretted having originated the idea of the visit.

A drive led from the street to the doorway and then curved back to the street again. Beside the carriage-way ran a narrow brick path for those afoot. Two stone urns, just a wee bit out of plumb, and a carriage-block adorned the grass before the house. Huge maples and oaks partly hid the old mansion, and at the back there was a veritable plantation of trees and shrubs, so overgrown and crowded that the late sunlight scarcely filtered through. Back there, too, near the house, was a long line of one-story structures; a stable, at one end, and

then a carriage-house, and then an open woodshed, and then a poultry-house.

As the three boys started up the gently ascending, curving walk to the front door, the westing sun sent long shafts of orange light through the maples and oaks and flashed rudely against a corner window. But the shadows were black and there was a somber stillness about the place that impressed at least one of the visitors unpleasantly. Pud appeared to be unaffected and chattered without pause all the way to the entrance, pointing out this feature and that and recalling past adventures. Coincident with their arrival at the door, there came a long roll of distant thunder. In the west the sun was descending into a bank of sullen purple clouds, while northward a sudden flare of lightning showed.

'Guess we're going to be lucky to have a roof over us to-night,' said Pud. 'There's a peach of a storm coming up.'

He raised the old iron knocker and beat a startling *rat-a-tat* in the silence. Presently, as nothing happened, he knocked again. Subsequently, while the thunder pealed once more, he pulled energetically at a crockery bell-knob. Far away, within the house, they heard a bell jangle. But nobody answered. Pud muttered disgustedly and almost yanked the bell-knob

out by the roots, but still there were no results.

'Reckon folks ain' to home,' observed Harmon.

'*Somebody's* here,' said Pud impatiently. 'Gee, Aunt Sabrina *never* goes anywhere. It's funny, though. Let's try the back.'

So they trooped around the corner and along the farther side, through a shadowed nave formed by two rows of lilacs and syringas, to the back door. It was even more still and eerie here, and when Harmon, slapping a mosquito on a bare leg, said 'Ha!' in sudden triumph, the others jumped nervously. There was a square porch at the back, latticed on three sides and screened inside the lattice with mosquito wire. The stout door was closed tightly and locked. There was no bell in sight and so Pud pounded lustily and shouted 'Aunt Sabrina!' several times. After waiting a few minutes, they returned to the front of the house, Pud nonplussed, but still insisting that somebody must be at home.

'Maybe,' suggested Tim, 'your aunt's kind of deaf.'

'She isn't,' said Pud shortly. 'Anyway, the girl ought to hear. *Some one* ought to hear! Gee, you'd think they were all dead!'

'Reckon they is,' remarked Harmon cheer-

fully. 'Reckon some one done been here and pirated 'em.'

'Shut up,' said Pud impatiently. 'If you can't talk sense, keep still. You fellows wait here and I'll go over to the next house and ask the lady about it.'

'Well, I don't know,' answered Tim slowly. 'Maybe we'd better not bother. If we started right away and got a car, I guess we'd get back to the boat before it rained very hard.'

'Ain' we goin' eat?' asked Harmon anxiously.

'Yes,' said Pud decidedly. 'And we're going to eat right here. Gee, I don't want to spend the night in that launch if it's going to rain. And it's too late to find a place to put the tent up.' A crash of thunder that shook the ground under them brought a gasp of alarm from Tim. 'You wait!' shouted Pud, and set off at top speed across the lawn.

The sunlight was gone now and a coppery light filled the world. Overhead dun-colored clouds raced fast, but in the north a great bank of grayish-purple piled higher and higher. A big drop fell on Tim's hand. Then another splashed on the step. Tim wished very much that he was back home in Millville.

Harmon, viewing the impassive front of the big house solemnly, asked helpfully: 'Mister Tim, you reckon this here house is hanted?'

‘Yes, I do,’ answered Tim emphatically. ‘I’ll bet it’s full of hants and ghosts and — and everything! And I wish to goodness we’d never come here! I don’t believe Pud’s got any aunt, and, if he has, I hope she chokes!’

‘Must be awful deaf ol’ lady,’ mused Harmon.

The rain, after those few drops, had decided to hold off awhile, it appeared. There was no stirring now. It was as if the world held its breath, expectant, waiting. Another terrific crash of thunder pealed across the heavens, nearer now, louder, more appalling. Tim grasped Harmon’s arm tightly.

‘Gosh!’ he muttered. ‘I — I ain’ goin’ to stay here! I’m —’

At that moment Pud came into sight again. He wasn’t running now. In fact, he wasn’t even walking briskly. His hands were in his pockets and his whole appearance indicated dejection.

‘Gone away,’ he called dismally when he was within hearing distance. ‘She left this morning for Mumford and won’t be back till to-morrow afternoon. She’s gone to a funeral. And the girl’s gone with her. I guess we’re out of luck!’

‘Sure is,’ assented Harmon.

‘Well, I guess we are!’ exclaimed Tim violently. ‘Why don’t your old aunt stay at home sometimes? Gosh, look at the fix we’re in! It’s going to rain like anything in a minute and we’re

three or four miles from the boat and you don't even know where the car line is and —'

'I do, too! It's just four or five blocks over there.'

'Well, then why don't you say so? Want to stay here and get struck by lightning? Or drowned? Come on, can't you, for goodness' sake! If I had an aunt —'

That is as far as Tim's eloquence carried him, for at that instant the sky opened and the deluge descended. With one accord they raced up the steps, assisted in their flight by a roar of thunder and a blinding flash of lightning, and cowered, half-stunned, under the narrow hood above the doorway.

'Gee!' muttered Pud. Tim was beyond words. Harmon, his eyes showing very round, giggled.

'Ol' Mister Thun'er sure speak right out loud that time! Whoo — ee!'

In front of them was a hissing, drumming wall of water that shut off the world as completely as though a silver-gray curtain had been suddenly lowered. The shelf-like projection above provided but scant shelter from the downpour and they were all getting wet very fast. The thunder slam-banged again and the gray world blazed with light. As the echo of the thunder died away, there came a sharp,

triumphant cry from Pud, and the next instant he was down on his knees in the torrent, poking about at the foot of the steps. Then he was back again, gasping, laughing, shaking the water from his face, with a big iron key in one hand!

'Just remembered!' he shouted above the seethe and hiss of the rain. 'She always hides it there! Funny I didn't think of it sooner!' As he spoke, he fitted the key in the lock, there was a creaking sound, and the door fell open before them.

Pud stamped water from his clothes, tossed his reeking hat to a table, and closed the big door again. 'There!' he cried triumphantly. 'How's this?' Then, partly from reaction, he fell to laughing loudly, awakening strange echoes in the big, dim hallway. 'Gee, wouldn't Aunt Sabrina be mad if she knew? I can see her face right now!'

Tim started nervously and looked behind him, but there was no Aunt Sabrina in sight; only the dark portals and the blacker well of the broad stairway. He wiped his drenched face and neck with an already damp handkerchief and gave vent to his feelings. 'Of all the blamed idiots!' he sputtered. 'Keeping us standing out there in that rain when the doorway was right there all the time! I'm soaking wet right to the skin and I'll probably catch

cold, and it's all your fault! If you had any sense —'

A salvo of thunder, and the hallway was ablaze with vivid white light! Tim stood rooted with terror, his mouth still open, but no words coming! As silence fell again, both he and Pud started and stared in alarm toward the doorway at the back. From beyond it came faint but unmistakable sounds; footsteps, a clatter of metal! Tim turned a glance along the dim hallway toward the front door and had already made one hurried step in its direction, when Pud laughed with nervous relief.

'Harmon,' he said.

Sure enough, Harmon was no longer with them! Together they made their way toward the sounds, through the darkened dining-room and the dimmer pantry to the kitchen. Harmon was in the act of setting fire to the paper and kindlings he had stuffed into the big stove. He looked up as they entered and grinned serenely.

'Goin' have us a fire in 'bout two shakes, Mister Pud, so's we can get us dry.'

'Great!' approved Pud, and found the gas bracket and sent a flood of illumination over the big room.

Somehow, the light and the sound of the crackling flames seemed to make everything

all right at once. Tim forgot his peevishness and wriggled out of his jacket, and Harmon, having moved a folding clothes-dryer to the end of the stove, spread the garment out on it. Pud was on the porch now, peering into the big refrigerator. Harmon added more wood to the fire and then carefully applied lumps of coal. A gentle warmth was already perceptible. Tim's frowns smoothed out and he smiled contentedly as he rubbed damp hands together. Pud came back with the results of his foray and set them on the table; a carton of eggs, a shoulder of boiled ham, butter, a sauce-dish of stewed tomatoes, and a jar of milk not quite full. Tim cheered so loudly that a jarring peal of thunder made almost no impression on him!

In fact, after that they almost forgot the storm entirely. Here was warmth and light and food; slathers of food, for Pud had invaded the pantry and produced, as if by magic, bread and jelly and cup-cakes and a jar of preserved ginger. With the viands assembled, and Harmon fairly crooning over them, he armed himself with a lamp and made his way up the big staircase into the silent, mysterious regions above. To tell the truth, he didn't like that excursion much, but he made it just the same — rather hurriedly — and returned with three blankets. Then they all disrobed and hung their wet

clothes before the fire, which was now going at a great rate, and drew the blankets about them. After that it was up to Harmon. Pud and Tim drew chairs as near the stove as they might without interfering with the cook and sat back in blissful ease and pleasant anticipation.

The sight of Harmon trying to fry eggs and hold his blanket about him at one and the same time sent them into convulsions of laughter, and Harmon, joining in, danced around the kitchen with a tin spoon waving about his head. The acme of mirth was reached when Pud imagined Aunt Sabrina entering at the moment!

What a dinner that was! Or, rather, let us say what a banquet, for no mere ordinary dinner ever provided such a variety of dishes! They had two kinds of ham; fried ham until it gave out and then cold ham; eggs — two apiece; stewed tomatoes; bread and butter; coffee — that was Harmon's brilliant thought; milk while it lasted; cup-cakes; sweet crackers; currant jelly; preserved ginger — which Harmon tried and disapproved of; and many of Aunt Sabrina's early sugar-pears, these latter discovered by Pud on the dining-room sideboard. But even that array was none too great for three such appetites, and when they had finished the top of the kitchen table was almost

as bare of crumbs as it had been an hour before!

They took counsel then. The storm had abated, but it was still raining busily and with no sign of cessation. The thought of returning through the rain to that drenched and comfortless launch held no allure. Here there was warmth and shelter; beds if they dared take possession of them. Tim's courage failed at the idea of climbing into one of Aunt Sabrina's immaculate four-posters, but Pud was for being hung for a sheep instead of a lamb. As for Harmon, busily washing up, his advice was not asked. Yet, in the end, it was Harmon who decided the question of going or staying.

'These here clo'es ain' goin' be dry 'fore mornin',' he declared. 'Reckon we jus' have to sit aroun' an' wait till they is.'

Whereupon, remembering he was a pirate, Pud seized the lamp again and strode toward the hall. 'Come on,' he commanded. 'Let's find out where we sleep!'

Dutifully, but doubting his wisdom, Tim followed.

CHAPTER VII

THE PRISONER IN THE TOWER

PUD and Tim shared a big four-poster bed in the room always occupied by the former when, once a year, he accompanied his parents to Great-Aunt Sabrina's. This was at the back of the house, to the left, the smallest of the rooms on the second floor. Opposite, across the broad hall that ran from front to back, was a huge bathroom, containing an old-fashioned zinc tub boxed in walnut paneling, and cutting off a corner of it was a stairway leading down to the kitchen. Harmon was given a bed made of two thick comforters from the maid's room, doubled lengthwise and laid on the floor. A single blanket answered for covering.

As the day had been, on the whole, fairly strenuous, all hands were fast asleep before ten. Pud, though, didn't slumber very peacefully. He had overindulged in the preserved ginger, I think. At all events, while Tim, having once fallen asleep, scarcely moved, Pud thrashed about a good deal and awoke more than once to the sound of Harmon's gurgling respirations and the gentle, persistent patter of the rain outside. They had left the door open, such being

their custom when at home, and it was when Pud had returned to full consciousness for the second or, possibly, third time that he heard a sound that could be attributed neither to Harmon nor the rain.

The sound came from somewhere below and suggested to the curious listener the opening of a stubborn drawer containing some metallic contents that rattled together. His first thought was, of course, that Aunt Sabrina had returned home, and the thought was accompanied by an unpleasant sinking sensation. It also had the effect of bringing him very wide awake. For a minute he lay in bed and considered a course of action. It might be that, if he did nothing at all, his presence, and that of his companions, would remain unsuspected until morning. On the other hand, it was more probable that Aunt Sabrina's sharp eyes would see that things were not just as she had left them, or that the maid would miss the comforters and blanket and institute a search for them. On the whole, as little as the plan appealed to him, Pud decided finally that right now was the time to appear and explain. Of course, Aunt Sabrina would look very fearsome and probably have quite a lot to say about boys with wet feet dirtying up her floors and helping themselves to her victuals and —

Right there Pud sat up in bed very suddenly, staring amazedly into the gray darkness. Why, it couldn't be Aunt Sabrina! It just *couldn't* be Aunt Sabrina for the simple reason that he had locked the front door on the inside and the big iron key still remained where he had turned it! And without the key, how could Aunt Sabrina have got in? He simply couldn't imagine either Lydia, the middle-aged maid and companion, or Aunt Sabrina forcing a window and climbing over the ledge! But if it wasn't Aunt Sabrina stirring quietly about downstairs, who could it be?

His heart beat faster while he strained his ears. For a long moment he heard nothing, and he was just about to tell himself with vast relief that he had imagined the previous sounds when they came again. Resisting the impulse to awaken Tim, he crept out of the big bed and made his way noiselessly to the door. From below, seemingly from the dining-room, came the tinkle of metal and the creak of a board.

'*Robbers!*' thought Pud.

His first impulse was to return and awaken Tim and Harmon, his second to make certain that he was right. He would look an awful fool if he waked the others up and then discovered that the suspicious sounds had been made by — well, some perfectly innocent thing such as a

cat! After a moment of hesitation he emerged into the hall. The stairway was a long distance, but he reached the railing finally and, guiding himself by it, crept on until he could crane his head over it and bring the dining-room door into his field of vision. The stairs and the hall below were dark, but beyond the open door of the dining-room there was light. It was a very weak light and Pud guessed that it came from a small electric torch. While he gazed it vanished entirely. Then it reappeared, stronger this time, as though it was focused closer to the door into the hall. There was a shuffling, dragging sound and the faint clink of metal once more, as though muffled by cloth. Then, with startling effect on the watcher, the light fell on the edge of the doorway and traveled past into the hall, illumining it with faint, white radiance.

Pud retreated swiftly to the room. There, a hand on the doorknob, he thought hard. What was going on downstairs was quite plain to him. Some one was stealing Aunt Sabrina's silver! Aunt Sabrina thought a good deal of her silver, for much of it had belonged in her family for several generations, and she would, Pud knew, be terribly grieved if she lost it. Therefore she mustn't lose it. Some way he must circumvent the robber. The telephone,

an old-style wall affair, was in the lower hall and not two yards from the dining-room. Plainly that offered no solution. Pud considered a sortie in force, but he remembered that burglars carried weapons. Even if they managed to frighten the burglar, he would probably take his booty with him. Further planning was interrupted by the soft sound of feet on the stairs, and Pud retired inside his door and watched breathlessly through a half-inch crack.

The intruder mounted the stairs unhurriedly, with only an occasional inquiring flash of the diminutive torch. He made very little noise, but, on the other hand, did not seem particularly fearful of being heard. In short, he gave Pud the impression of one not in the least concerned with the possible presence of other persons in the house, and so, Pud reasoned, he had learned of Aunt Sabrina's absence and was proceeding under the assumption that he was perfectly safe and could take all the time he wanted. At the head of the stairs, he swept the light about him, keeping, as always, the rays close to the floor, and in that instant Pud, peering through the narrow aperture in the door, saw him for the first time.

To be more exact, what Pud saw was the silhouette of a man's form, a form apparently rather small and slim and not nearly so for-

midable as imagination had pictured it. Then the light went out again and the form melted into the darkness. Light footsteps trod the carpet and a door squeaked faintly. The burglar had gone into Aunt Sabrina's room, on the front of the house. Pud didn't believe the fellow would find much of value in there, and evidently he didn't, for he was out again very soon, his coming indicated by another quick flare of the torch. Across the hall was an empty chamber, known as the 'best room.' That held the burglar's attention even a shorter time, and from there he came back, past the head of the stairway and disappeared into the maid's room.

Meanwhile Pud was thinking up plans and discarding them rapidly; to lock the door and somehow get to the ground from the window and alarm the neighbors; to shout for help from the same window; to get downstairs by the back passage, the door to which was almost opposite, take possession of the burglar's loot and make off with it before the latter could follow. But none of these schemes promised well. Behind him was the peaceful sound of Tim's breathing and the louder respirations of Harmon. Pud had time for a brief thought of their surprise when they awoke and learned of what had been happening; and then he hoped hard

that they wouldn't awake just yet, for the least sound from them would, if heard by the midnight visitor, either send that person scuttling away with his booty or — well, Pud didn't like to dwell on the alternative. Burglars, he believed, were dreadfully fond of shooting holes in persons who interfered with their plans! But Pud had assured himself that the key was on the inside of the lock and he was rather certain that he could get that door closed and that key turned in mighty quick time when the right moment came.

Across the hall from the maid's room and directly opposite was the door giving onto the stairway that led to The Tower. Next to it was the door of a second spare room. Then, toward the back of the house, were the bathroom door, wide open at present, and, next, the door to the kitchen stairway, closed. It was fair to assume that the burglar meant to make a thorough inspection of the premises, and that sooner or later, probably last of all, he would want to know what was in the room behind whose door Pud stood on guard. When that happened — well, Pud didn't know just what he would do then, but meanwhile he had thought of a plan!

Its success depended on two things; whether the burglar proved curious enough to want to

know what lay at the top of The Tower stairway and whether the key of the stairway door was on the inside or out. That there was a key Pud knew for a fact. His heart beat a little faster as the light showed once more for an instant and the burglar, having made a thorough and, Pud hoped, profitless search of Lydia's room, emerged again into the hall. Then the light traveled along the stairway spindles, swept the edge of the carpet and crept upward along the white panels of The Tower door. And then it went out, but not before Pud had seen, with intense satisfaction, the key!

In the succeeding darkness there came the soft, padding sound of the man's feet on the carpet and then the faint click of the latch. Again the light flared. The burglar was in the open doorway and the rays of the torch were exploring the stairs that led upward. A long moment passed. Then darkness fell once more and Pud's heart sank. His plan had failed! He waited for the sound of the man's steps again, but there was only silence out there. Uneasily, Pud's hand tightened on the knob and he stood prepared to close and lock the door. But at that moment a sound came to him that brought a thrill of renewed hope, the sound of a stumbling step on the bare stairs! Momentarily The Tower doorway showed lighter

against the gloom of the hall and Pud widened the aperture of his own door and craned his head out. Now he could hear unmistakably the creaking of the burglar's feet on The Tower stairs. Pud crept out into the darkness. Once more there was a dim light across the way. The man had reached the little landing and was making the turn.

Pud took a long, deep breath and crept down the hall toward The Tower door. He reached it, pulled it slowly toward him. From above came the complaining of the stair treads, then silence. Pud could imagine the man's disgust as he swept his light over the square emptiness of that chamber, and something very close to a chuckle mingled with the click of the latch as it slipped into place. Swiftly then Pud's fingers flew to the key. Perhaps it had been unused so long that it had forgotten how to turn, for it resisted his efforts stubbornly. He put all his strength against it unavailingly, and his heart sank. Beyond the door were faint creakings. The burglar was coming back down the stairs! Caution urged Pud to flight, but he was stubborn, too, and, getting a new grasp on the key and putting the fingers of his left hand about the knuckles of his right, he made a final and desperate effort. There was a loud protest from the unwilling key, but it turned!

Then Pud ran!

Back at the door of his own room he paused and listened. There was no sound for a long moment save the thumping of his own heart. Then the knob of The Tower door was gently turned. A second silence. Then there was a straining, creaking noise as the imprisoned man put his weight against the door. But Aunt Sabrina's house had been built in the days when doors were made strong and thick and heavy, and for the time, at least, Pud had no fear of its yielding. With a bound, Pud was pulling the blanket from Tim and prodding him into wakefulness, and after that many things happened with confusing rapidity.

Lights flared upstairs and down. Pud spoke breathlessly to a sleepy telephone operator and, after what seemed an interminable time, to a gruff-voiced police sergeant. Tim and Harmon, close to The Tower door, talked to each other in deep, bass voices designed to impress the burglar with the fact that his escape in that direction was barred by at least two resolute men. As Tim left the telephone to light the gas in the dining-room and rescue Aunt Sabrina's silver, he heard Harmon saying in loud tones that seemed to come from his boots — or that would have come from his boots had he worn any: 'I's sure cravin' to use this here ol'

resolver, Mister Daley. I ain' had me a chance to shoot it off for a long time!' And then came Tim's voice, deep and husky: 'And I'd certainly like to use this automatic of mine, Mister Johnson!'

Pud found what he expected to find, a burlap bag filled with Aunt Sabrina's smaller silver and about all the larger pieces. Some of the latter had not been molested, and these, as Pud guessed, were only silver-plated. The locked drawers of the big, old-fashioned mahogany sideboard had been forced, and Pud reflected that for the burglar's sake he hoped the latter would not be around when Aunt Sabrina viewed the chipped and cracked edges of the wood! To be on the safe side, he dragged the bag to a closet and turned the key on it. Then he ran upstairs again and relieved Tim while the latter donned the rest of his clothes. They were all fully dressed by the time the police arrived, and Pud admitted them somewhat impressively through the front door, while Tim and Harmon leaned over the upstairs balusters and stared down enthralled.

That the burglar had attempted to descend from his prison by the roof was evident later from the fact that one of The Tower windows was found open. Probably his courage had failed him as soon as he had set foot on the

slippery, rain-filmed shingles and he had decided to face trial rather than risk a broken neck. At all events, when they opened The Tower door and went cautiously up, four burly officers with drawn revolvers, there he sat on the top step, a rather hungry-looking, undersized little rat of a man, calmly awaiting them.

‘Ho,’ said the officer in command of the force, ‘it’s only “Slim” Towle! Come on down, Slim, and we’ll give you a ride.’

So Slim came down docilely, looking in fact, or so Pud thought, rather relieved, and one of the men went through his pockets very carefully and took out quite a number of interesting articles including a black-jack, a small nickeled pocket torch, and one or two other personal articles — but no revolver! — and a large collection of small trinkets picked up during his visit. There was, for instance, Aunt Sabrina’s gold locket that held a strand of braided brown hair, a tortoise-shell comb, a silver-and-pearl paper-cutter, Lydia’s bar-pin set with imitation emeralds, a gold hairpin, a fine gold chain, and a single silver cuff-link. All of which articles, announced the police, would have to be taken to Headquarters and there claimed by their owners. Then ‘Slim’ Towle, looking a bit bored and rather weary, went down the stairs between two of the officers and out the front

door. The officer in charge of operations — a lieutenant, Pud thought — viewed the burlap bag and its contents, nodded and said:

‘Had a pretty good haul there. Well, if folks will leave their silver lying around loose, they’ll lose it sooner or later.’ Then he turned suddenly and viewed the three lads with stern gaze. ‘Now,’ he asked disconcertingly, ‘who are you and what are you doing here?’

Pud had to make rather a long story of it, but in the end the officer went off without arresting any of them for complicity in the crime and they watched him climb into the patrol wagon with vast relief. By that time the eastern sky was graying and the rain, having subsided first to a drizzle, had ceased entirely. Harmon lighted a fire in the stove again and prepared breakfast from what remained in the larder while Pud and Tim returned upstairs and, as best they could, tidied up. Tim was inclined to be a bit disgruntled and peevish because Pud had not awakened him sooner and allowed him to share in the excitement from the first, but Pud explained and excused until Tim grudgingly forgave him. Harmon’s skill as a cook was not so apparent this morning, since recent events had left him in a highly excited state, but they made out a satisfactory breakfast of coffee, eggs, and toast. Pud closed the

outside blinds across the window in the dining-room at which 'Slim' Towle had made his entrance by removing a pane of glass, and finally announced that he was ready to leave. But at the last instant he bethought him of something and reëntered the house, to be gone several minutes. During his absence he wrote a note to Aunt Sabrina and left it leaning against the coffee-urn on the sideboard where she could not fail to find it. The note was as follows:

DEAR AUNT:

We came to see you, but you were not home so we stayed because it was raining and lightning. We slept in the back room and did not hurt anything I hope, and we took some food as we were very hungry. I caught the burglar, and everything he was going to take is in the bag in the closet except some jewelry of yours and Lydia, and the policeman said you would have to go to the police station and claim it. We had a very enjoyable visit, but were sorry not to see you. Good-bye.

Your affectionate nephew,

ANSON PUDDLESTONE PRINGLE, JR.

Then Pud locked the front door and hid the key under the lowest step and, with Tim at his side and Harmon padding along behind, set forth under the first weak rays of the sun to find the Moorehouse Avenue car line.

CHAPTER VIII

THE RESCUE

THE return to the launch was uneventful. They had the car to themselves most of the way, and Tim dozed off in a corner. Pud lost his bearings after they had reached the center of town and so they were carried four blocks farther than they should have gone and had a long, wet and dismal trudge to the river and made two failures before they found the right alley. The *Vengeance* was extremely wet and soggy when they reached her. The potatoes had wandered all around, the rain had leaked into several of the lockers, and a *swish-swashing* sound under the floor informed them that there was much bailing to be done. With the passing of the early morning excitement, reaction had set in and every one's spirits were low. Tim complained that he had not had sufficient sleep and even Harmon seemed more solemn than usual. One thing, though, they were agreed on, which was that they had had quite enough of Livermore!

But there the engine failed to agree with them. Pud turned the fly-wheel until he was

red-faced and breathless, and then Tim tried it. Then Pud peered into the gasoline tank and fiddled with every movable part of the engine. After that he thought of priming the cylinders, but that didn't produce the desired result. Half an hour passed and the sun came up over the roofs of the town and deepened the flush on Pud's countenance. At intervals Pud arose and turned the wheel over. At intervals he sank back on the seat in exhaustion. At intervals Tim performed a similar routine. Once, very early in the proceedings, the engine had emitted a faint but heartening cough. Since then it had not even sneezed.

Tim offered many well-meant suggestions and theories, but Pud received them all coldly. Between spells at the fly-wheel he viewed the engine in deep disgust, a disgust that was just short of loathing, and said a great many unkind things about it. Toward the last he included Andy Tremble in his remarks. Of the three aboard, Harmon alone retained his equanimity. As his companions became more and more depressed, Harmon's spirits visibly lightened. When, though, he sought to give expression to his cheerfulness by playing soft melodies on his mouth-organ, Pud turned on him wrathfully and threatened to 'pitch that thing in the river' if he didn't quit!

'All you do is sit there and chuckle,' accused Pud. '*You* don't break your back on this old wheel! *You* don't blister your hands! You just — just sit there and think it's funny! My goodness, I should think you'd be ashamed!'

'Jus' you-all let me turn it,' said Harmon eagerly.

'Yes,' said Tim, 'let him try it, Pud.'

'No, sir! He don't know how. He'd probably break his wrist or something.'

'No, sir, Mister Pud, I won't. I done seen how you-all does it. Jus' you let me —'

'Well, all right,' agreed Pud grudgingly. 'But you have to take hold of the handle like this. See? And then pull it out when you've turned it over, because if you don't it might fly back on you and break your arm. Now you be careful, Harmon.'

'Sure will!' Harmon heaved upward —

Then he sat down suddenly on the floor, the handle flew against the locker and — the engine started!

'Are you hurt?' cried Tim anxiously.

Harmon felt of himself gingerly. Then he shook his head in solemn negation.

'No, sir, I ain' hurt, but how-come it ac' so short with me, Mister Tim?'

It was Tim's turn to laugh then, and Pud's, and they seized it. Harmon viewed them with

funereal reproach and picked himself up. Pride asserted itself. 'Ain' any ol' engine can hol' out agains' me,' he declared as he went dignifiedly back to the stern.

The early start brought them to Berryville before nine, and an hour later they steered the launch up to a shaded bank and went in swimming. It was the hottest day they had so far experienced, and life aboard the launch when the sun beat fiercely and scarcely any air moved was none too pleasant. After their swim, a protracted affair, they remained in bathing attire, deciding to have lunch there and wait for the cooler afternoon before going on. They pulled the launch downstream a few rods to where the sunlight could reach it and spread their damp tent and bedding out on the bank to dry. Tim went to sleep then, Harmon sat in the stern of the boat and played on the mouth-organ, and Pud fished. At twelve hunger asserted itself and they made a hearty lunch. Afterward Tim dozed again and Pud went back to his luckless fishing, assisted by Harmon. The fish evidently had no appetites for grasshoppers and Harmon's search for worms was unsuccessful. At three, by which time a faint breeze was stirring, they bundled things back on the boat and went on down the river.

The river had changed now. It was three

times as wide as it had been when they had set forth at Millville, the pleasant forests had disappeared and settlements were close together. Boats were numerous, too; fishing launches that chugged noisily past, tugs that towed schooners of lumber or barges of coal, small sailboats that tacked back and forth in the light breeze, flat-bottomed punts, occupied by patient fishermen, anchored along the margins. While to-day the bosom of the river was hardly more than ruffled, Tim realized that, with a strong wind blowing, the same stream might well become uncomfortable to a poor sailor; and Tim, while not certain, had a suspicion that rough water would prove him to be such. Consequently, he accepted with secret enthusiasm Pud's plan to turn into Fox River, some few miles below, and ascend that tributary for a way.

'But,' stated Tim positively, 'I'm not going near Swamp Hole, Pud.'

'Well, who wants to go there?' demanded Pud. 'Gee, Swamp Hole's twenty miles or more up the river! Besides, I've heard that you can't get to it, anyway, unless you know just how. That's what makes it like it is; filled with murderers and such-like folks, I mean. They just know the officers can't find them.'

'Well, I don't suppose,' answered Tim char-

itably, 'that they're all murderers up there. I guess there are some decent people, Pud.'

But Pud didn't hold with that notion. He shook his head and frowned darkly. 'I guess decent folks wouldn't be likely to live in with all those cut-throats and — and desperadoes, Tim. No, sir, I guess they're all pretty much alike in Swamp Hole, and I wouldn't go in there for any amount of money. Well, maybe I would for a couple of hundred dollars, but not any less than that.'

'A couple of hundred!' exclaimed Tim. 'Gosh, I wouldn't do it for — for a couple of million!'

'Well,' hedged Pud, 'of course I didn't mean I'd go alone. I wouldn't mind going with Mr. Garvey, the marshal, and, maybe, Sumner Jones and — and Mr. Thrasher.'

'Maybe, if they were all armed,' granted Tim doubtfully.

'The's worser things than murderers in that ol' Swamp Hole,' observed Harmon gravely. 'The's ghos'es an' hants, Mister Pud.'

'There's no such thing as ghosts,' replied Pud severely.

'How-come?'

'Because there isn't!'

'Mister Pud, did you-all ever see a ghos'?'

'No, I didn't, and there's no use in your ask-

ing me "How do I know then!" Because that's no argument at all! Nobody believes in ghosts any more, Harmon; nobody but just darkies!"

'How-come Mister Tim say they was hants in that there house what you' Aun' live in, then? He ain' no darky!'

'I suppose he was just fooling,' answered Pud, looking to Tim for agreement. Tim nodded, but Harmon insisted with conviction:

'He don' ac' like he's foolin' when he say it!'

Further discussion was prevented by their arrival at the mouth of the Fox River, and Pud swung the bow of the launch to starboard and entered new water. The Fox proved a sluggish stream, but even so the launch showed speedily that moving against a current was quite different from moving with it, and although Tim, at Pud's command, advanced the throttle to the limit, the boat seemed contented to chug along at a four-mile gait. Perhaps it may have had a premonition of what awaited beyond and was loath to meet it!

For a while the stream, nowhere much more than a hundred yards wide, curved slowly between low banks edged with rushes from which wide fields, mostly tilled, ascended gently to distant farmhouses and barns. It was perhaps an hour before the forest closed in upon them and they found themselves moving slowly

through silent reaches where the shadows lay broadly on the scarcely moving water. It was very warm in there, for the trees cut them off from the breeze that was swaying the topmost branches, high above.

The heat and the silence together seemed to exert a depressing effect on them, and when they spoke they found themselves quite unconsciously talking in lowered voices. It was a relief when, chugging around a bend, they came on an aged negro in the stern of a punt, half asleep, while two corks lay placidly on the surface near by. He awoke sufficiently to wave and bow to them and to shake his head when Pud asked if he was having any luck. When they went from sight around the next curve, his chin was back on his chest once more.

The river turned and twisted continually, but the turns were leisurely and there was deep water right to within a few feet of the tree-hung banks. Now and then a snag sent them farther into the middle, but on the whole navigation was easy and Pud might almost have emulated the old darky and dozed at his post. Turtles slipped noiselessly from half-submerged logs and now and then a fish broke the smooth surface. An occasional kingfisher awoke the silence with strident challenge and jays called mockingly from the woods. Once they passed a

mother duck herding four youngsters before her to safety, and Harmon's eyes grew very round and hungry-looking. It was now time to think of disembarking and setting up camp, and Pud watched anxiously for a clearing, but the trees continued on each side, so closely set, so tangled in undergrowth as to afford no chance for the tent. Tim showed indications of mutiny and suggested dining on board and finding a camp-site later, but just then a new turn of the stream promised better things.

On the left the forest gave place to a clearing that ran back, fan-shaped, to the summit of a distant slope. At some time, not very recently it seemed, the timber had been cut, and everywhere within the bare expanse unsightly stumps and unburned mounds of slashings remained. Over the water hung a decrepit wharf, too high at the present stage of the river to offer convenient landing. Well beyond the wharf, drawn to the edge of the red-clay bank and moored to a near-by stump, lay a shanty-boat. This was the first of its kind they had encountered, although farther up the river they found them numerous enough. The present one was small, with a four-foot roofed deck at the shoreward end from which a plank led upward to the bank. It was painted green, but the color had faded to a neutral tint. There were small one-sash win-

dows on the sides and end. That the shanty-boat was in use was proved by two things; smoke issuing from the stovepipe thrust through the roof and a person sitting on an upturned nail-keg on the deck. At first the person appeared to be a boy, but a closer look showed her to be a girl in a bluish dress.

'I guess,' said Pud, 'we can camp beyond 'em, but maybe we'd better ask.'

At sound of the launch the girl on the shanty-boat had turned to observe it. Now she stood up and waved a hand. Pud grunted merely, but Tim, more polite, waved back. Pud turned the nose of the *Vengeance* toward the shanty-boat and prepared to hail it. He was going to say 'Hello!' and then 'Say, mind if we camp beyond you folks?' All he did say, though, was 'Hello!', for at the same instant the girl spoke.

'Help!' she called.

The occupants of the launch stared in surprise. Doubtless, though, they had misunderstood her, and Pud asked, 'What did you say?' This time there was no mistaking.

'*Help!*' said the girl.

Pud looked about him in every direction. So did Tim. So, too, did Harmon. Not a person was to be seen. Never, indeed, had any one of them ever looked on a more quiet, peaceful, and lonely scene. Pud viewed Tim blankly and

received as blank a gaze in reply. By this time the two boats were close together and mechanically Pud eased the launch up to the stern of the other, motioning Tim to throw out the clutch. Harmon, in the rôle of deck-hand, laid hold of the shanty-boat. Pud now gave serious attention to the girl.

She was apparently thirteen, possibly fourteen years old, with a thin, deeply tanned face and coppery-brown hair drawn tightly back from her forehead into a long braid which, at the present moment, hung across one shoulder and terminated in a bow of bright red ribbon. She wore a dress of some thin stuff that showed blue flowers on a white ground. It was not a new dress, nor, observed Pud, was it particularly clean. Brown cotton stockings enclosed a pair of painfully thin ankles. A pair of scuffed black shoes completed her costume. Pud decided that she was not at all pretty. In fact, he took an instant, if mild, dislike to the girl; but this was more because she was regarding him with an intense, unwavering stare from a pair of large dark eyes, a stare that disconcerted him unpleasantly.

Tim, untroubled by the hypnotic gaze, voiced his curiosity.

'Say, what's the matter?' he demanded. 'What you yelling "Help" for?'

'Because,' replied the girl, still regarding Pud, 'I want to be rescued.' She had rather a nice voice, sort of low and gurgly, and there was such a tragic note in it that Tim thrilled and once more gazed apprehensively about over the desolate scene.

'Rescued!' echoed Pud. 'What — who — Say, what are you doing? Getting funny with us?'

'Oh, no!' The girl leaned nearer and dropped her voice. 'You must take me away from here before they come back! You will, won't you? Oh, say you will not desert me!'

'Take you where? Who is it's coming back?' asked Pud dazedly.

'Those — those awful men!' She looked swiftly, fearfully toward the edge of the woods, and Pud looked, too, a sort of creepy feeling edging up his spine. 'They kidnaped me from my happy home and they're keeping me a prisoner in this dreadful place.' She was speaking now in a thrilling whisper. 'You can't imagine what I've been through! It — it has been terrible!' She shuddered. So did Pud and Tim, the latter having joined Pud at the bow. 'You will rescue me, won't you?'

'Well,' muttered Pud uncomfortably, 'I don't know. It — it sounds sort of funny to me. Say, what's your name, and where do you live?'

'My name's Gladys Ermintrude Liscomb, and I live in Corbin. Oh, won't you please, *please* take me home to my poor, distracted mother? If you are seeking a reward —'

'Gosh, no!' exclaimed Tim. 'Sure, we'll take you home! Won't we, Pud?'

'Gee, I don't know!' Pud scowled at the deck. 'What I want to know —'

'Oh, dear!' cried the girl distressedly. 'We're wasting time! They'll be back almost any moment now. They went off with their guns an hour ago. They said they were going hunting, but' — again she shuddered — 'I don't know what awful deed they are up to!'

'That's right,' urged Tim, tugging Pud's arm. 'We'd better get a move on.'

'What I want to know,' repeated Pud doggedly, 'is what they wanted to kidnap you for.' He viewed Gladys Ermintrude in cold appraisal. 'You don't look to me like the sort of girls that get kidnaped. I guess your folks ain't got much money, have they?'

'They have, too!' declared the girl resentfully. 'They're fabulously wealthy, you horrid thing! Why, I wouldn't be one bit surprised if mother had offered a thousand dollars reward for me!'

'Huh, that isn't much,' said Pud.

'Or maybe ten thousand,' added Gladys Ermintrude hastily.

'Gosh!' murmured Tim.

Even Pud was impressed now, but he was still cautious.

'Well, maybe it's all right,' he muttered, 'but Corbin's a good eight miles from here, I guess, and we've got to get our tent pitched. Maybe in the morning we could attend to it for you.'

The girl's wail of despair was really heart-rending. 'Too late!' she cried. 'To-morrow I shall be far away!'

'Oh, say, Pud,' begged Tim, 'have a heart, can't you? Gosh, suppose she was your sister or something! Gosh, I guess you wouldn't like it if she was! I guess —'

'I haven't got any sister,' replied Pud stubbornly. 'Anyhow, what I say is —'

'Yonder's them,' interrupted Harmon in pleased excitement.

They all looked. Several hundred yards distant two men, carrying shot-guns, had emerged into the clearing. They were undeniably rough-looking persons, and, rescue or no rescue, Pud instantly decided, this was no place to spend the night!

'Quick!' said Gladys Ermintrude tensely. 'Start your engine! It won't take me a second to get my bag!'

She disappeared into the shanty-boat and

Tim sprang to the fly-wheel. Pud stared irresolutely after the girl and then uneasily toward the leisurely approaching men. The engine came to life and Pud reached a decision. He didn't like that silly girl, and there was something mighty funny about the whole business, but here was real adventure!

'Stand ready to cast off!' he ordered briskly.

'Er-huh,' replied Harmon.

Then they waited. From within the shanty-boat came faint sounds, but no Gladys Ermintrude. Pud looked apprehensively at the approaching kidnapers. They were walking more briskly now, even, he thought, hurriedly. Doubtless they had caught sight of the launch. A sunbeam glinted on the barrel of a gun and Pud felt suddenly chilly at the back of his neck. He called hoarsely.

'Hey there! Gladys Whatyoucall it! Get a move on, can't you?'

'Just a minute!' called the girl.

'No, sir, not a half a minute! If you ain't out here before I count five I'm going to leave you! One —

'Maybe we'd better start along,' said Tim uneasily. 'We could come back later, I guess, and get her, Pud.'

'Mighty fierce-lookin' men, they is,' declared Harmon cheerfully.

'Four,' counted Pud, his intervals shortening perceptibly. '*Five!* Back her up, Tim!'

'Here I am,' announced Gladys Ermintrude triumphantly. 'Will you please take my bag?'

'No, I won't,' growled Pud. 'Throw it in and jump quick! Let's go, Tim! Give her gas!'

Gladys Ermintrude landed somewhat inelegantly in the launch just as that craft churned away from the shanty-boat and just as a stenorian hail came across the clearing.

'*Hey! Where you goin'?*' shouted a voice.

Pud swung the wheel hard, the *Vengeance* pushed her nose into the current, and Gladys Ermintrude, jumping to a seat, waved defiantly toward shore.

'Ha, ha!' she cried. 'At last, villains, I am out of your clutches! Before dawn the hand of Justice —'

Unceremoniously Pud grabbed a skinny ankle and Gladys Ermintrude collapsed in a heap. 'You shut up!' sputtered Pud. 'Want us to get shot? You get down and stay down!' He was obeying his own order as well as he could, and so were Tim and Harmon. The launch was picking up speed now and the shanty-boat was already a length behind, shutting out of sight the kidnapers for the moment. 'Give her all there is, Tim!' called Pud.

'She's got it,' answered Tim. 'Reckon they'll shoot?'

'I don't know! Keep down, you'd better.' Pud put his own head up and looked back. The two men, roughly clothed and bearded desperadoes indeed, were running hard now, were almost at the bank. As long as they kept on running, Pud reflected, they couldn't shoot, and even if they did shoot they couldn't do more than pepper the boat as long as they all kept below the gunwale and —

'Come back here!' called an angry voice. 'Where are you taking that girl? I'll have the Law on you!'

'Oh,' exclaimed Gladys Ermintrude despairingly, 'that he should speak of the Law!'

The other man shouted now, his words coming more faintly as the distance increased. 'You Tibbie! You Tibbie Liscomb, you come right back here! If you don't I'll tell your mother the minute —'

The rest was lost in the noise of the engine and the steady thud of the propeller. Pud scowled questioningly at the girl crouched beside him. 'What's he call you Tibbie for?' he demanded suspiciously. 'And how's he going to tell your ma if —'

'He does it to humiliate me,' answered the girl bitterly. 'They both called me Tibbie.'

Ah, well, it's over now!' She sighed deeply and turned a look of gratitude on Pud. 'My preserver!' she whispered. 'Had it not been for you, who knows what awful fate were mine! Never, never can I thank you enough, my brave —'

'Aw, cut it,' growled Pud. 'And you'd better wipe the end of your nose. You've got engine grease on it.'

CHAPTER IX

PURSUIT

THE shanty-boat, the sagging wharf, and the waving men grew small in the distance. The forest closed in once more. At last the clearing passed from sight as the launch, chugging determinedly, rounded a shadowed bend in the river. Pud and Tim sighed with relief. Harmon, as solemn as an owl, perched on the stern and stared curiously at Gladys Ermintrude. The girl, preparatory to her flight, had somehow struggled into a very tight sweater of a deep orange shade which, beyond the shadow of a doubt, harmonized sadly with her tanned face and copper-hued hair. She had brought with her an ancient satchel encompassed, at one end, by a rusty-black strap and at the other a piece of clothes-line. It was the satchel that again aroused Pud's sleeping suspicions.

'Say, if you were kidnaped,' he asked, 'how'd you happen to bring all your clothes along with you?'

'Sakes alive!' exclaimed Gladys Ermintrude. 'Why, those aren't *all* my clothes! Why, I've just got a few simple things in the bag, hardly a change of attire.'

'Just the same,' persisted Pud, 'if you were kidnaped —'

'Gosh,' expostulated Tim, who, being somewhat susceptible to feminine charm, chivalrously disapproved of Pud's incredulous attitude, 'why wouldn't she take some duds with her?'

'Well, because as a usual thing kidnaped folks don't have time to pack bags. When you kidnap a person, you just grab him quick and throw him into a — an automobile and beat it!'

'You don't understand,' said Gladys Ermintrude in a somewhat superior manner that increased Pud's growing dislike. 'You see, they came for me when I was all alone in the house, and after they had bound me up and thrown me helpless on — on the floor —'

'Gosh!' muttered Tim.

Harmon chortled, whether from horror or delight it would have been difficult to say.

'They got the bag and made me tell them what to put in it,' continued Gladys Ermintrude. 'But, sakesalive, I simply couldn't think of half the things I really needed, and I came away without my negligee and — oh, several other things. I really don't see how I managed to get along as well as I did!'

'Well, then,' said Pud, 'what did they do it for?'

The girl's eyes opened wide. 'Why, for the reward, of course!'

'Sure,' assented Tim. 'Folks always offer rewards, Pud.'

Pud looked unconvinced. 'I wouldn't,' he said, eyeing Gladys Ermintrude with no enthusiasm. Then: 'Who were those men?' he asked.

'They were' — the girl's gaze wavered momentarily — 'they were a Mr. Liscomb and —'

'But that's your name!' exclaimed Tim.

'Yes,' she agreed. 'He's my uncle. The tallest one, I mean.'

'Oh, shucks!' said Pud. 'You can't be kidnaped by your own uncle! Gee, I knew there was something queer about it!'

'You can, too,' responded the girl indignantly. 'I guess an uncle can be just as — just as villainous as any one. You don't know my uncle Asa!'

'Who's the other one?' asked Pud.

'Uncle Asa's brother. His name's William.'

'Well, he's your uncle, too, isn't he?' demanded Pud impatiently.

'No, he's not.'

'Well, but, gee, he's got to be! If he's your uncle's brother, he's your uncle, too. Isn't he, Tim?'

'Well,' began Tim hesitantly. But at that

moment Harmon broke in with the warning announcement that there was a boat coming down the river, and the matter of relationship was dropped. Pud viewed the still distant craft and decided on discretion.

'They might see you and tell your *uncles*,' he said to the girl, emphasizing the last word triumphantly. 'You sit down here and I'll throw the end of the tent over you till they get by.'

'It isn't "they," it's "him," answered Gladys Ermintrude. 'It's Pete Minger, and he's going after them.'

'After those — after your uncles?'

She nodded cheerfully. 'They're going farther down the river. Pete's going to tow them. He's sort of late and —'

'He's coming like the dickens,' exclaimed Tim admiringly. 'Gosh, that boat goes, don't it?'

Pud hastily pushed the seemingly unwilling girl to a position beside the tent and drew a corner of a flap over her. 'You keep still,' he warned her. There was a smothered response that sounded rebellious. 'You scrooch down, too, Harmon. We don't want any trouble, I guess. You sort of turn your back, Tim.'

The oncoming launch bore down fast. In the stern lolled a disreputable-looking individual in a torn khaki shirt, hatless, smoking a pipe. He

waved carelessly as he passed, but Pud saw that he was plainly interested in the *Vengeance*. Even after he had passed, he kept his gaze upstream for several minutes.

'All right,' said Pud finally, throwing off the tent flap. 'You can get up now.'

Gladys Ermintrude arose with a very red countenance and sneezed several times. 'I don't see,' she announced vindictively, 'what you had to do that for. I guess my — those awful men saw the name on this boat, and I guess Pete Minger saw it, too. So what sense was there in putting me under that horrid, smelly old tent, I just wish you'd please tell me?'

'Gosh, that's so,' agreed Tim. Pud, feeling rather foolish, merely looked haughty and made no answer. Tim went on, a tone of uneasiness in his voice, 'Look here, Pud, suppose those men — those uncles, you know — I mean those one uncle and —'

'Oh, get on with it,' interrupted Pud.

'Well, suppose they get this fellow, Pete Something, to take them in his launch and come after us?'

'Suppose they do?'

'Well, my goodness, it's a heap faster than this boat! They'd catch us in no time! And, gosh, Pud, if they did catch us, I guess they'd

be pretty mad and I don't know what would happen!'

'No more do I,' said Pud gloomily. 'But it was your idea, this rescue business. I didn't want to do it. I didn't —'

'I do believe that's just what they'll do,' broke in the girl excitedly. 'Isn't it just thrilling? That launch of Pete Minger's is the fastest thing on the river, I guess!'

'You seem mighty pleased about it,' said Pud bitterly. 'I dare say you don't care a bean if we get plugged full of bullets!'

'I do, too, but they haven't got any bullets. It's just bird-shot. Anyway, they probably won't catch us.'

'Why won't they?' demanded Tim eagerly.

'Because it's getting pretty dark, and if we go up Fish-Hawk Creek and hide under the bushes, I guess they won't find us.'

'Fish-Hawk Creek?' inquired Pud. 'Where's that?'

'Just a short distance. It's the first creek you find. I think I can tell when we get to it. I've been there lots of times with my — with friends.'

'Kidnaped, I suppose,' said Pud sarcastically.

'Aw, Pud!' begged Tim.

Just then came a pathetic voice from the shadowy figure of Harmon in the stern. 'Ain' we goin' have no supper?' he asked.

It came to Pud and Tim instantly that they were very, very hungry, but Pud shook his head. 'Got to wait till we land,' he declared. Tim sighed deeply and Harmon relapsed into a melancholy silence. Pud yielded the wheel to Tim and tried to add to the boat's speed, but no amount of oiling or coaxing made any difference. The *Vengeance* plodded doggedly along at some four miles through the growing darkness while Pud, gazing back down the dim stream, watched for pursuers. Presently he broke into a conversation between Tim and Gladys Ermintrude with: 'How much farther's this creek?'

The girl, recalled to her responsibilities, looked about her a moment. Then, 'Sakes alive,' she exclaimed in surprise, 'I do believe we've gone by it! Didn't you see a little opening on that side a few minutes ago?'

'No, I didn't!' answered Pud shortly. 'Are you sure we've passed it?'

'We-ell, I'm not absolutely — Yes, I am, too! There's Peacher's Bend right up there where the two tall pines stick up, and Fish-Hawk Creek's a quarter of a mile below that. My, weren't we stupid to go by it?'

'Weren't *we* stupid!' echoed Pud disgustedly. 'I thought you were going to tell us when we got to it! Gee, I never saw a girl yet who was

any good in a pinch! What'll we do now? Is there another creek anywhere near?'

'No, there isn't. Not for more than two miles, I guess. And I don't think you're very polite to your guests to talk like that! I'm sure if I was running this boat —'

'Well, you aren't,' snapped Pud crossly. 'And I'm going to turn back,' he added defiantly.

'We-ell,' muttered Tim, 'if you think we'd ought to —'

'Well, gee, if we don't those fellows will catch us easy, won't they? *Some one's* got to decide *something*, I should think! We can't *all* spend our time just *talking*! You take the engine and I'll see if we can turn around without hitting the bank.'

They could and did and then Pud ran the launch as close as he dared to the left-hand bank and went slowly back downstream in search of the mouth of Fish-Hawk Creek. It was too dark now to see anything distinctly save the steely ribbon of river where the last of the daylight reached it through the walls of forest. Pud's spirits were getting very low. They usually did get low if he went much beyond his accustomed time for food. He was taking some slight pleasure in a mental picture of Gladys Ermintrude walking the plank when

something leaped into his vision far down the stream. More than once already he had imagined just such an object, but this time it wasn't imagination. Harmon saw it, too, and remarked the fact with melancholy alacrity. And then they all saw it and for a moment nothing was said aboard the launch. Then it was the girl who broke the eloquent silence.

'Sakes alive!' she giggled. 'Isn't this just too dramatic?'

'If you weren't a girl,' began Pud between his teeth.

'Gosh,' murmured Tim, 'I guess we're in for it!'

'Can' do nothin' to me,' announced Harmon defiantly. 'I ain' kidnap nobody!'

'If we could only find that creek!' muttered Pud.

The other boat was coming fast, fairly eating up the space between, and now they could hear very plainly the steady *plup-plup* of her exhaust. Pud desperately wondered if, should they stop and huddle close to the bank in the shadows, they could escape being seen. Then a wiser plan came to him and his spirits rose buoyantly.

'I'm going right on past 'em,' he announced. 'They won't be looking for us to come this way, and they won't suspect, I guess, when they

see the name on the bow isn't the same! You get down and cover yourself up, Gladys Evinrude. You see that she don't show, Tim. Harmon, you scrooch down on the bottom and stay there. You sit up here with me, Tim. Make-believe you're asleep. Put your arms on the — That's it! Here they come! Every one keep still and, no matter what happens, don't say a word or make a sound!'

The two launches drew nearer and nearer, Minger's boat in mid-stream, the *Jolly Rodger* close to the bank. Pud leaned carelessly against the gunwale, trying to express drowsiness by his attitude. Now he could see that the approaching boat held three forms, one seated and one erect at the bow, another standing near the middle. Then a strong flash-light swept across the few yards of intervening water and a hoarse voice hailed.

'*Hi, there! Slow down!*' it commanded.

CHAPTER X

FISH-HAWK CREEK

THE other boat slowed, stopped. Pud pretended not to understand, and the *Jolly Rodger* went chugging on, the skipper waving a friendly hand. But the ruse didn't work.

'*Hi, you! Stop that launch!*' was the order.

Pud shook his apparently slumbering companion. 'Wake up, Tim,' he shouted. 'Take the wheel!'

Tim groped sleepily for the wheel, yawning loudly, and Pud stepped to the engine and pushed up the throttle. With the other hand he threw the clutch out. By the time this was accomplished some forty feet of river separated the two boats, and the *Jolly Rodger* was still floating slowly with the current. The light from the electric torch passed searchingly along the launch, from stem to stern and back again, to come to rest finally on Pud. And while it passed the low voices of the men sounded plainly.

'That isn't the one. Look at the name, *Jolly Rodger*.'

'Well, no, but it looks like it, and —'

'Besides, there were three of them on the other.'

'Might be another one somewheres about,' said the second speaker. Then a third voice, evidently that of the boat's owner, spoke.

'Tain't the craft I seen awhile back. *Vengeance* that was called. It was goin' up-river, too.'

'Say,' called a voice then, 'did you pass a white launch with three fellows and a girl in it a while ago?'

'I saw one farther up the river,' answered Pud.

'Notice the name of it?'

'Why, I don't know as I did. Did you, Tim?'

'Yes,' answered Tim, with another yawn. '*Vengeance*.'

'How far up?' was the next question.

'Maybe two miles. It was going sort of slow. Well, I've got to be getting on. Good-night.'

'Good — ' began the voice from the darkness.

'*Ker-chew!*' It came from beneath the tent canvas, muffled yet startlingly loud for all of that! There was a moment of silence on both boats while the eye of the electric torch raced back and forth suspiciously. And then:

'*Ker-chew!*' This time it was Tim, and the violence of the sneeze almost took him over-

board. The light enveloped him for an instant, wavered, vanished.

‘Good-night, boys! Much obliged!

‘Don’t mention it,’ answered Pud faintly.

The other launch churned the water astern and jumped forward again. Pud pulled the lever toward him and the *Jolly Rodger* took up her journey. For a long moment nothing was said on board. Then, from behind the boys came a sibilant whisper:

‘Have they gone? Can I get up?’

‘Yes,’ answered Pud bitterly, ‘but you mighty near spoiled everything! What did you go and sneeze for like that?’

‘Well,’ replied Gladys Ermintrude, emerging from the tent flap, ‘I guess you’d sneeze, too, if you had to keep your head under that dusty old tent!’ Then her indignation vanished and she laughed softly. ‘My gracious, didn’t we fool them, though? It was just like ‘The Dangers of Dorothy’; where the heroine hides in the potato sack and the villains throw her in the cart and don’t know it! Did you see it?’

‘No,’ said Pud shortly. ‘Say, isn’t that the creek ahead there?’

‘Yes,’ said the girl.

‘All right. I’m going in there a ways and tie up to a bank so’s we can talk things over. I guess they won’t look for us there.’ There was

a sound of hilarity from the stern and Pud peered back. 'What's your trouble, Harmon?' he demanded.

'Nothin', Mister Pud,' answered the darky chokingly. 'I — I's jus' laughin' at the way Mister Tim done fool them folks! 'Ker-choo!' he say, 'Ker-choo!' My golly, that was surely one pow'ful lucky sneeze!'

'Well, you'd better stop that noise,' grumbled Pud, 'or they'll hear you and come back! Slow her down more, Tim, will you? Gee, this isn't much of a creek!'

It wasn't, so far as width was concerned, but fortunately it was deep and there were no snags, and Pud made the turn neatly and the launch went slowly, cautiously forward. Tim got a pocket torch and, standing beside Pud, explored the banks on either side. Presently they found what they sought, a place where the launch could be laid close to the bank and under the drooping branches of a big willow. Better still, as later developed, there was a cleared space a few yards away from the creek large enough to hold the tent; for they had by now abandoned all idea of getting on to Corbin that night. It was already past eight o'clock, and even aside from the danger of again encountering Pete Minger's boat, to make the ascent of the winding stream with no better illumination

than could be supplied by two pocket flashlights would be a good deal of a hazard. Pud devoutly wished that they had never seen Gladys Ermintrude, but since she was on their hands they would have to reckon with her.

Personally, Gladys Ermintrude offered no objections to spending the night there. On the contrary, she appeared to be greatly taken with the idea. She said it reminded her of 'Clashing Souls,' where the hero and the heroine were cast away on the desert island. Tim said he was awfully sorry about it and hoped her poor mother wouldn't worry too much. Gladys Ermintrude said she wouldn't, probably, because this was choir-practice night, and her mother played the organ, and that would keep her mind busy; and was she to sleep in the tent, or where?

Pud pointed out gloomily that to light a fire would be tempting Providence, but he was secretly thankful when he was overruled by the others, since the prospect of eating cold food was as repugnant to him as to Tim and Harmon. The latter soon had a small blaze, and presently there was the cheering fragrance of sizzling bacon. Pud walked along the bank of the creek a way and returned with the welcome assurance that you couldn't see the light of the fire more than about fifty feet distant.

Gladys Ermintrude sat on the ground close to the blaze and chattered cheerfully. She said it must be wonderful to be able to cook things the way Harmon did. Herself, she knew nothing about cooking or any household duties. Her mother had never allowed her to do any of the work because it might injure her hands. Besides, with all the servants they employed, what would have been the sense of it? Oh, of course, she could make delicious fudge, but that was just play. Cooking and such household drudgery was all right, she thought, for girls who had no ambition, but personally she considered it a waste of time. There were so many more important things, weren't there?

Tim, the principal recipient of these confidences, said he supposed there were, but that he guessed it wasn't a bad idea for girls to know how to cook a little, because they never could tell when they might have to. But Gladys Ermintrude laughed lightly. In her own case, she declared, knowing or not knowing how to cook didn't matter a bit, because she meant to live entirely for her Art. Motion-picture actresses, especially stars — one of which Gladys Ermintrude was to become shortly — didn't have to bother themselves with such ordinary and vulgar affairs as keeping house. They either lived in magnificent hotels or else they owned beauti-

ful bungalows in California and had large retinues — Gladys Ermintrude pronounced it 'retin-wees' — of servants.

Tim was rather impressed with all this, in spite of the secret conviction that Gladys Ermintrude was totally unlike any moving-picture star he had ever seen, and he would have patiently listened to further particulars regarding her career if Harmon had not announced supper just then.

That was a most welcome, appetizing, and satisfactory repast. They had not eaten anything for eight hours or so, and the bacon and scorched slices of bread that Harmon called toast and the scalding hot tea vanished rapidly. Even Gladys Ermintrude, while she appeared desirous of impressing the others with the daintiness of her appetite, did full justice to everything. She was inclined to be critical of the tea, explaining that she was accustomed to having lemon with hers instead of condensed milk, until Pud told her, almost impolitely, that if she didn't like what she was getting she needn't drink it. Gladys Ermintrude thereupon conquered her distaste and asked for another cup.

Food can do miraculous things sometimes. It did on this occasion. It vanished Pud's irritability, smoothed out the anxious lines on

Tim's forehead, and set Harmon to crooning a song while he cleared away. It also made them entirely reckless in the matter of the fire. Or maybe it was more especially the mosquitoes that did that. Anyway, they piled it high with wood, with apparently no thought for the kidnapers in Pete Minger's launch, and basked in its welcome warmth.

Gladys Ermintrude said it was just like the scene in 'Haunted Souls,' where the shipwrecked millionaire and his friends made the fire on the beach and waited for the waves to drown them. Tim retained sufficient energy to inquire why they wanted the waves to drown them, and Gladys Ermintrude explained that there was no escape for them because of the towering cliffs at their back. Tim suggested that they might have proceeded farther along the beach and found a place where the cliffs weren't so towering, but the girl didn't seem to think that would have been possible, although she couldn't explain just why.

'Say,' asked Pud, 'don't you ever do anything but go to the movies?'

'Of course, I do,' answered Gladys Ermintrude. 'I attend to my social duties and — and read a great deal; and then, of course, I'm always studying my Art.'

'Gee, you must lead a swell life,' said Pud.

'What sort of things do you read? Ever read "The Three Musketeers"?''

'N-no, I don't think so. Who wrote it? Mother is very particular about my reading. I've read all of Annabel Smothers' stories; "Lady Lucia's Diamonds" and "Loved and Lost" and —'

'Slush,' said Pud.

'They're not either! They're beautiful! Maybe you wouldn't care for them; boys don't, I guess; they can't — can't appreciate sentiment.'

'Huh,' grunted Pud.

'Mister Pud,' interrupted Harmon, 'does I get me some of that there reward?'

'What reward?'

'What we gets for unkidnapin' this here girl.'

'No, you don't,' replied Pud. 'Nobody gets any reward.'

'How-come?'

'Because, in the first place, we don't want any, and, in the second place, because there isn't any!'

'Why!' gasped Gladys Ermintrude, deeply pained.

'Ain' she say her ma goin' give ten thousan' dollars for her?' asked Harmon, puzzled.

'Yes, she said so,' answered Pud, laughing

with deep irony, 'but she says a lot of things. She says she's going to be a movie actress!'

'I think you're too — too disgusting for words!' exclaimed the girl. 'I *am* going to be a moving-picture actress! Why, sakes alive, everybody knows that!'

'I'll bet the moving pictures don't know it,' laughed Pud. 'And as for that reward, any one can have my share for a nickel!'

'Well, I don't know,' objected Tim. Gladys Ermintrude was plainly too wounded for speech. 'I don't see why her folks wouldn't give something for her safe return to — to — for her safe return. It generally *is* done, Pud.'

'Yes, in stories and movies!'

'Well, but, wait now! There was a piece in the paper just last winter where a boy was kidnaped and his father offered a lot of money for him; I think it was five thousand dollars!'

'Of course there was!' declared the girl triumphantly.

'All right,' said Pud cheerfully. 'You go on believing it. To-morrow you'll see whether I'm right or wrong. Because to-morrow morning Gladys Evinrude's going to be handed over to her ma just as soon as we can get her there. And now I'm going to bed. You and I'll sleep in the boat, Tim, and she can have the tent. Harmon, you bed down here by the fire. And

don't you go and raise a rumpus on account of any skunk or anything else, because if you do I'll sure tan your hide!'

Later, on the edge of sleep, Pud remembered that he had not written his letter home.

CHAPTER XI

GLADYS ERMINTRUDE IS RESTORED

CORBIN came into sight at a little before nine o'clock the next morning, a quiet, rambling town of little homes and shaded streets commanded by a tall red water-tower. The railway touched Corbin on its way to the coast, and, as the launch drew near the line of small wharves and landings, there came the shrill screech of a locomotive bustling in from the north. Just below the town they passed a small settlement of shanty-boats, many of them hauled high and dry above the river, others moored to the bank with a plank or two bridging the gulf between. Harmon looked long and interestedly and finally confided to Tim that some day he was 'goin' to have him one of them there shunty-bo'ts.'

No one had slept very well the night before; no one, at least, save Gladys Ermintrude, who declared that she had 'slumbered divinely.' Pud and Tim, who had lain on a combination of one cot and the top of a locker in the launch, had certainly found nothing divine about their slumbers, and the fact had left them both a

trifle tired and morose this fine morning. The sight of Corbin had produced in Pud the first pleasant sensation of the day, and as the launch chugged leisurely up to a slanting float, beyond which the sign 'GasOLine, OiL & WaTer' flaunted from the side of an old shed, the sensation grew. Here they were to see the last of Gladys Ermintrude!

During the last few miles the girl had become unusually silent, and a close observer might have suspected her of being slightly worried. And now, at the landing, she seemed to have lost some of that self-possession that had served her so admirably during the trying times just passed. Possibly the joy of being restored to her anxious parents affected her. When the launch had been made fast, she was all ready to disembark, her colorful sweater over her arm and her bag in hand.

'Well,' she said, just a trifle breathlessly, Pud thought, 'I'm awfully much obliged to you boys. I shall never forget what you did for me.'

'That's all right,' said Pud unemotionally. 'How far's this place where you live?'

'Oh, I wouldn't think of troubling you any further,' protested Gladys Ermintrude. 'I live quite a ways from here. You mustn't —'

'No trouble at all,' replied Pud, climbing out. 'We don't mind a walk.'

‘No,’ agreed Tim, ‘we’d like it. Let me take your bag.’

Gladys Ermintrude clung to her bag tightly, though. ‘No, you mustn’t,’ she declared. ‘It wouldn’t look right for me to be seen walking through town with you boys. And — Mother would be horribly shocked! Thank you so much!’

‘I guess your mother can stand it,’ said Pud grimly. ‘Come on, Tim. Harmon, you stick here till we get back.’

Gladys Ermintrude bit her lip as she followed across the wharf, but presently she appeared to recover somewhat of her wonted composure and allowed the gallant Tim to take her bag. Then, a step or two in advance of her escort, she led the way. By the time they had crossed the main street of the town and were among the modest residences, she was walking with quite an air. Occasionally she bowed impressively to a passer or to some housewife engaged in sweeping a tiny front porch. On such occasions the persons addressed turned in their paths or paused in their labors to stare long and fixedly after her.

The distance was not great, after all, for they had only walked four blocks when Gladys Ermintrude paused at a gate in a white picket fence, smiled gratefully, and held out her hand.

'Well,' she announced, 'I'll say good-bye. It has been most kind of you —'

But Pud, who had been observing the house, interrupted coldly. 'Aw, come on,' he said. 'You don't live here.'

'Why, I do, too!' Gladys Ermintrude stamped her foot in a most unladylike manner. 'You give me my bag!'

'Don't you do it, Tim. Look at the name on the door; "Hopkins!" And look at the windows all closed up. Don't any one live here, I guess.'

'You mind your own business,' flared the girl. 'And you give me my bag this instant!'

'Tibbie! Tib-bie-e-e!'

Two houses farther along a slight little woman was beckoning from the porch. The three turned and looked. Gladys Ermintrude's manner underwent a remarkable change. She laughed joyously. 'Why,' she exclaimed, 'there's Mamma! Hoo-ee, Ma!'

Pud and Tim, the latter's face an interesting study in bewilderment, followed the lightly tripping feet of Miss Liscomb. In front of a tiny buff-painted house, neat, but not at all the mansion of Gladys Ermintrude's description, Mrs. Liscomb awaited them, an expression of mingled relief and uneasiness on her thin, tired face.

‘Well,’ she said as the girl clasped her emotionally, ‘so here you are! Your pa’s been hunting all up and down the river for you. Now, that’ll do! I’ve been hugged quite a plenty. You stand still a moment and tell me what you’ve been up to this time.’

‘Why, Ma!’ said Gladys Ermintrude reproachfully. ‘How you talk! And right before strangers, too!’

‘Humph,’ said Mrs. Liscomb. ‘Young man, you can set that bag down on the steps, and then maybe you’d better tell me where you came across this young lady.’

‘Now, Ma,’ said the girl, ‘I’ll tell you all about everything just as soon as we’re alone. We mustn’t keep these boys any longer. Oh, dear, I forgot to introduce you, didn’t I? Ma, this is Pud. I don’t know his other name. And this is Ted — no, Tim. They’ve been very kind and obliging. They brought me up the river in their launch, and Ted — Tim carried my bag for me. Wasn’t that nice of him? And now I guess I’ll say good-bye —’

‘We rescued her from the kidnapers, ma’am,’ said Pud innocently, ‘and we’d have had her here before only they chased us and we had to camp out overnight on a creek down there.’

‘Oh,’ said Mrs. Liscomb, turning a piercing

look on her daughter, 'so she was kidnaped, was she?'

'Sakes alive, Ma, can't you take a joke?' giggled Gladys Ermintrude. 'He's always joking. He's just too funny for words!'

Pud scowled. 'How big is the reward, ma'am?' he asked.

'Reward?' faltered Mrs. Liscomb.

'Well, I think I'll take my bag in and — and My, how very tired I am!' And Gladys Ermintrude hurriedly faded from the picture.

Mrs. Liscomb heaved a sigh. Then she said: 'Come up on the porch, please, and tell me just what happened. You look real tired yourselves.'

Pud, occasionally aided by Tim, gave a brief but succinct narrative of events, and at intervals Mrs. Liscomb nodded and at intervals she sighed.

'Of course,' said Pud in conclusion, 'I knew there wasn't any reward. We didn't come for that, ma'am. But what I'd like to know is was she really kidnaped?'

'No, she wasn't. I'm so sorry about it all, because you were dear to take all that trouble. I might as well explain, first off, that Tibbie —'

'Is that really her name?' asked Tim.

'Her name is Isabel, but we've always called her Tibbie.'

'Gosh, she said it was Gladys Ermintrude!'

'I dare say. She — she says a great many things that aren't so,' sighed Mrs. Liscomb. 'Sometimes I call them just plain, out-and-out lies, but her father says it isn't that; he says she's got too much imagination. She reads an awful lot of trashy books, and just recently she's gone perfectly insane about moving-picture shows. Mr. Liscomb says she'll get over it as she grows older, but I don't know. Seems to me she gets worse instead of better.' Mrs. Liscomb paused and sighed discouragedly. Pud pursed his lips and then said judicially: 'Well, she certainly is a pretty good imaginer, ma'am!'

'I do hope it's no more than that,' was the troubled reply. 'She says she's "playing a rôle," whatever that means; something she's picked up from those moving pictures, I suspect. She's just about wore me out. I did think when she went down-river with her pa and her Uncle Asa I'd have a minute's peace. She was wild to go, and while they didn't want her, I guess, they took her along because she's a real handy cook. They were going fishing and shooting for a week, you know.'

'Yes'm,' said Pud. 'Were those men her father and uncle?'

'Yes, and of course they were dreadfully upset when Tibbie ran off like that in a strange

boat, and they spent hours going up and down the river looking for her, and then they came back here about midnight to see if she'd come home. Mr. Liscomb says he's going to whip her when he gets her, but I don't suppose he will. He's always saying that, but he never does it.'

Pud stared into the sunlight as one who sees a vision. 'I guess,' he said earnestly, 'whipping's awfully good for children sometimes.'

'Well, I don't know. Mr. Liscomb will be back very soon. He went to telephone to some folks who live down the river a piece. He thought it might be that Tibbie had gone there. Now don't you hurry away. Mr. Liscomb will want to thank you for taking such good care of her!'

But Pud was already on his feet and moving anxiously toward the steps, and Tim was very close behind him. 'Yes'm,' replied Pud hurriedly, 'but it wasn't anything, and we've got to be going now. I — we're awfully sorry we let her fool us, ma'am, and didn't know about them being her father and uncle, because if we had known we wouldn't have done it, of course, and I'd like you to tell him so, if you please. And I guess we'd better be going on now!'

'Well, I'm sure I'm much obliged to you,' said Mrs. Liscomb heartily, as she shook hands

with each. 'And I know Tibbie is, too. Or, if she isn't, she ought to be. I guess she'll be right ashamed of herself, too.'

'Yes'm,' agreed Pud, his gaze fixed uneasily in the direction of the business section. 'Yes'm. Well, that's all right. We were glad to do it — I mean — Well, good-morning, ma'am!'

At the gate, with no backward glance from even Tim in the hope of one last fleeting glimpse of Gladys Ermintrude, the boys turned to the right and walked briskly away. They believed that the returning Mr. Liscomb would approach from the other direction, and neither Pud nor Tim was anxious to meet him. It might be, as Mrs. Liscomb had suggested, that he would thank them, but, recalling the events of the past eighteen hours, they had their doubts!

They didn't say much as they made their way as inconspicuously as possible back to the boat. Once Tim remarked in the tone of one who at last finds the solution to a puzzling problem:

'Remember when she said her uncle's brother wasn't her uncle? Well, he wasn't. He was her father.'

'About the only time she told the truth,' grunted Pud.

A little later Pud asked unkindly: 'What are

you aiming to do with your share of the reward, Tim? Let's see; a third of ten thousand dollars —'

'Aw, shut up,' muttered Tim.

They found Harmon asleep on the after seat, one bare black leg crooked over the gunwale. When awakened, he accepted the announcement that there was to be no reward coming his way with admirable philosophy. 'Reckon we's goin' have plenty money when we sack a town, ain' we, Mister Pud? Where-at's 'at town?'

As much as they desired to cast off and put space between them and the grateful Mr. Liscomb, they were obliged to transact certain business before doing so. Oil was needed, for one thing, and food for another. They had spoken carelessly before starting the trip of eating a great deal of fish, and in consequence they had not stocked heavily with meat. Now, save for a small residue of bacon and a single can of baked beans, the larder was bare of what might be termed the foundations of a meal. It was decided to replenish here and now, since, whether they went farther upstream or returned down it, there was no other town of size for many miles. Pud got his oil and then carelessly suggested to Tim that the latter could do the shopping if he liked. Tim showed

no gratitude for the favor. They debated sending Harmon to the stores, but in the end they concluded to go together. After all, Mr. Liscomb would be quite as likely to find them at the landing as in the town, and if they had to listen to his expressions of gratitude, perhaps it would be better to do so where there was plenty of room in case Gladys Ermintrude's father became too earnest.

Pud took the remains of the ten-dollar bill, which had been provided for current expenses and which had been broken at the gasoline station at Livermore, from its hiding-place, and they returned to the business street of the town, Harmon once more being left in charge of the launch. They purchased fresh meat and bacon and bread and a dozen bananas and a box of cookies, and then Pud, reflecting on the advantage of having small bills handy, proffered a five-dollar note. It was a surprisingly new and crisp note to have been through the pocket of a gasoline supply man. The grocer who accepted it seemed to be thinking something of the sort, for he turned it over and peered at it closely for several seconds. Then he fixed Pud with a stern look and asked:

'Where'd you get this bill, hey?'

Pud told him. The grocer again turned it over, again studied it. Then, with no further

words, he walked from behind the counter and laid a firm hand on Pud's shoulder.

'You come along with me,' he said. 'This bill may be all right, but it don't look it, and I've been stung twice already.'

Pud hung back. 'Where do you want me to go?' he asked.

'To the bank, young man. It ain't but four doors from here. I don't like the slick look of this bill, and I'm going to have Jim Knowles pass on it afore I take it.'

'Oh, all right,' said Pud, 'but there isn't anything wrong with it, I tell you.' Nevertheless, he was beginning to have doubts of the bill himself. It *was* awfully neat and crisp, while most of the paper currency that circulated thereabouts was quite the contrary. And he recalled Mr. Ephraim Billings's statement of a week before. A counterfeit bill, Mr. Billings had stated, looked just like a good one. And that was just what this bill looked like! Pud, as he walked docilely beside the grocer to the door of the Corbin National Bank, wondered if the penalty for trying to pass counterfeit money was very heavy. Tim accompanied them, looking greatly worried. They had to stand in line for a minute before the wicket. Finally, though, the man behind it was looking inquiringly from the bill to the grocer.

‘Well,’ he snapped impatiently, ‘what you want I should do with this, Henry?’

‘Want you to look at it.’

‘I am a-looking at it. What’s wrong with it?’

‘Looks sort of funny to me, Jim. Thought maybe it was phoney. I got stung twice just recent, like you know, and —’

‘Pshaw!’ The man behind the wicket thrust the bill back irritably. ‘I told you twenty times how to tell those counterfeit notes, Henry. Use your brains! I told you —’

‘All right, all right! This is O.K., is it? Then suppose you give me five ones for it, Jim.’

Jim did so, sourly, and the three returned to the store, the grocer apologetic, Pud and Tim much relieved.

‘You see,’ said the storekeeper as he made the change from the cash register, ‘there’s a lot of queer money been circulating around this part of the State recently. Tens and twenties, though I ain’t seen any of the twenties. About a fortnight ago two men came in here and bought nearly four dollars’ worth of goods and gave me a ten-dollar bill. It was a mighty nice-looking bill and I put it aside so’s to have it in case I was to need a nice crisp ten. Well, sir, when that bill went to the bank — happened I didn’t pay it out again — that feller we were just talking to took and stamped “Counter-

feit" right across it four or five times! And, by Jupiter, I was out ten dollars!'

'That was hard luck,' said Pud, reaching for his bundles.

'Wa'n't it? And then again, about a week after that, it happened again. That time it was Clay Moody, the garage man, paid me. He never could remember where he got it. Anyway, you see we've got to be careful, and that's why I was doubtful about that bill you handed me. It looked awful pretty. Well, if it ain't all right,' he chuckled, 'I don't need to worry. And, by Jupiter, I wouldn't feel any too blamed sorry if it *was* bad, seeing Jim Knowles was so tarnation snippy!'

They got back to the launch without further misadventure, and without, fortunately, so much as sighting the grateful Mr. Liscomb. Ten minutes later they were in the stream, bound up-river to a place known as 'The Flat,' where the bass lived. The Flat had a State-wide reputation as a fishing ground, and, although they were now supplied with enough fresh meat for one repast, they all agreed that a nice fried bass would touch the spot as nothing else could!

CHAPTER XII

MOSTLY FISHING

WITH Harmon at the wheel, closely watched by an anxious Tim, Pud settled himself at the stern and wrote a letter to his mother. Despairing of being able to narrate all the happenings of the past forty-eight hours, he decided to narrate none, or almost none. When completed, the letter conveyed hardly more than the bald information that they had spent Tuesday night at Aunt Sabrina's, that they had bought some more food supplies, that they were now on the way up the Fox River to fish for bass, and that they were all well. Elated by the escape from Gladys Ermintrude and by this recent performance of his duty, Pud dug out the damp and crumpled pirate emblem and once more displayed it from the stern. Tim viewed the flaunting skull-and-cross-bones doubtfully, but Harmon grinned approval, accepting it as evidence that the piratical life was at last about to begin.

The Flat, a marsh-bordered lake formed by the junction with the river of Two-Pond Run and Turtle Creek, was nearly a mile long and about half a mile wide. It held two small islands

and was in most places bordered by rushes and pond weeds. Beyond The Flat, Fox River bore to the right for three miles and was there joined by the Little Fox. Between Two-Pond Run and the Fox, northward, lay what was called River Swamp, a territory of swamp and hummock, twisting waterways, and numerous ponds. The ponds and streams held many fish, and in season water fowl congregated there in numbers. It was a favorite hunting ground with the adventurous, but one needed to know it well in order to navigate its confusing thoroughfares. Many tales were told of hunters or fishermen who had lost their way for days amidst that watery labyrinth. Somewhere beyond the dark cedar swamps and the oak and maple-clad hummocks lay that community of ill-repute, Swamp Hole, but outsiders were careful not to approach very closely to it, since it was well known that the Swamp-Holers considered fishing and hunting in River Swamp a privilege confined to themselves and had more than once shown resentment at the incursion of strangers. So thoroughly was this conviction of theirs respected that few persons throughout the State could boast of having seen Cypress Lake, a three-mile body of water lying north of Swamp Hole. Wonderful stories were told of Cypress Lake; of its unfathomable depths, of

the huge fish that lived there, of the mysterious disappearance of certain bold spirits who had unwisely sought to explore it. It got its name from a considerable growth of bald cypress which bordered it, and it was claimed that not for more than seventy miles farther south could a cypress tree be found again.

Just above Corbin the river narrowed somewhat and the trees gave place to thickets of alder and witch-hazel and storax. Here and there black oaks, pond pines, or ash trees formed small islands of verdure above the level of grassy bog, and occasionally a group of black willows hung over the water. The launch nosed its way into the unruffled water of The Flat an hour or so before noon and Pud dropped the little anchor off the lower end of the nearer island. Already there were a number of fishermen on hand. One or two occupied skiffs, but most dozed from the sterns of flat-bottomed punts. Several shanty-boats were in sight where the river entered and where the absence of weeds offered access to the shore. Some forty yards away from where the launch had anchored floated a dilapidated punt occupied by a man and a yellow hound. The man, who was simply attired in a cotton shirt and a pair of khaki trousers, and who wore a conical-crowned, broad-brimmed straw hat turned

down over his lean face, glanced at them briefly and returned at once to his observation of the cork float that depended from the end of a long bamboo pole. The dog wagged his tail in friendly fashion and sniffed in their direction. Then he, too, went back to watching the bob.

They had bought a dozen small green frogs on the landing at Corbin, and now they proceeded to bait up. Neither Pud nor Tim had had any experience in bass fishing, and at once they were faced by the problem of depth. They had anchored in about twelve feet of water, and now whether to put sinkers on or allow their frogs to choose their own positions below the surface bothered them. Harmon didn't approve of frogs, anyway, and was pessimistic from the start.

'If'n I had me a good ol' worm,' he muttered, 'I'd sure catch me somethin', but I ain' 'spectin' much of these here hop-frogs.'

Pud and Tim sought to learn how their neighbor's line was furnished, but as it remained quietly in the water they failed. Finally Pud elected to fish without a lead and Tim decided to use one. Harmon, who was using a home-made rod of his own devising, merely tied some ten feet of line to the tip, impaled Mr. Frog on a leaderless hook and dropped him overboard. Then he lay back on the stern seat,

cocked his right leg over his left knee, rested the pole between his first and second toes and fixed himself for a nap. After that quiet fell over the scene. The sun was almost overhead and the breeze was of the faintest. Now and then, acting on the advice of the man from whom they had purchased the bait, Pud and Tim drew their frogs from the water and allowed them to take some more air aboard. A half-hour passed. Harmon was breathing loudly in the stern, fast asleep. Then there came a sound from the nearby punt. The yellow hound was peering over the stern and wagging his tail deliriously. The big cork float had disappeared and the man was gingerly paying out on a taut line. Pud and Tim, forgetting their own fortunes, watched absorbedly.

Presently the man began to take in on the line, drawing it to him through a guide at the end of the pole and coiling it between his feet as methodically and calmly as though a hard-fighting bass was not on the other end of it. The hound's excitement increased and he began to bark ecstatically. If Pud could have barked, he would probably have joined in with the dog! Then, some ten feet from the punt, something flashed for an instant in the sunlight. But the fisherman was still coiling the line between his feet, and now the long pole was bending at the

end and he was shortening his hold on it. Then, while the water swirled close to the punt, up went the end of the bamboo, a fat, fourteen-inch bass gleamed in air and disappeared into the boat. Whereupon the hound, barking more furiously than ever, sprang upon it, his tail wagging delightedly. The man spoke quietly to the hound, who promptly backed off; then he unhooked the fish, observed it appraisingly, rebaited his hook, cast out again, and once more became motionless. Beside him, the yellow dog again gave all his attention to the float.

Pud pulled up his line and fastened a lead four feet short of the hook, for that was where the successful neighbor had his. Tim pulled up and set his weight back another foot. Harmon slumbered on. The sun got hotter and hotter, and Pud looked enviously at his neighbor's broad straw hat. He and Tim discussed the catch in low tones. Pud thought it might weigh a pound and Tim said a pound and a half. Anyway, it proved that there were fish to be caught there. Presently Tim spoke insinuatingly of food and Pud consulted his watch and agreed that it would be well to awaken Harmon. Just then, however, his bob acted queerly and he forgot all about food. The bob nodded at him, first, and then it started away as though having business at the other side of the lake. Pud's

eyes grew very round and his hands trembled. Suddenly the bob stopped traveling and floated tranquilly again. Tim spoke scathingly.

'Pshaw,' he said, 'why didn't you strike? He was on there. Bet you he got your frog!'

'He wasn't on,' replied Pud bitterly. 'He was just mouthing it. Suppose I don't know? Maybe he did get my frog, but —'

Pud was drawing his line out as he spoke.

'No, he didn't,' said Tim. 'I can see it. It's still on.'

'You sure?' asked Pud anxiously. 'I don't see — Oh, yes, there it is!'

He had brought the frog almost to the surface, and suddenly, just as he was starting to lower it again, there was a bronze-and-silver flash in the water and things began to happen!

'He's on!' shouted Tim. 'Hold him!'

'I am — a-holdin' him!' gasped Pud, doing nothing of the sort for the reason that he had lost his line and it was paying out at a great rate. All Pud was doing was holding the rod and groping wildly for the line. He got it finally when it caught about his foot, but by that time the fish had had a full forty feet of run and was thinking things over somewhere. Pud disentangled the line and began to reel nervously. *Click-click-click* — Then *cli-i-ick!* and out spun the line again!

'Gee, he must be a whale!' panted Pud. Tim, in a spasm of nervous excitement, hopped about behind him.

'Never mind the reel,' he sputtered. 'Get hold of the line and work him in that way. That's the ticket! He's coming!'

'You — you'd better get your line up out of the way,' said Pud. 'He might get tangled —'

'It is up! Look out! Don't give him slack!'

Something huge broke water a dozen feet away, sending the silvery drops high in air, and disappeared again with a mighty tug at the line. Pud yielded a few inches and then recovered them. The captive swerved toward the stern, circled back again and tried to head away. Suddenly there was a yelp from Harmon.

'I got me one!' he cried. 'I got me a basses!'

He was still on his back, holding hard to his pole which was buckling over the edge of the boat.

'Please, sir, Mister Tim, lay ahold of it till I gets up!'

'You fool nigger!' stormed Tim. 'You've gone and got your line tangled with Pud's! And he's got a bass as big as a house on! And if he loses him —'

'What you wan' I should do?' begged Harmon. 'Wan' I should leggo?'

'Yes! No! I don't know! Gosh, if we only

had a landing-net, Pud! Can you get him closer?’

Pud’s rod was bending threateningly and Harmon’s maple pole was giving forth sickening cracking sounds. Beside the launch, the water was boiling as the fish tugged and dived. Then Tim acted on the impulse. Leaning far down over the side of the boat, at the risk of a bath, he seized a line and heaved upward. Over the gunwale and into the launch came, not one bass, but two!

There was a shout of triumph from Harmon. ‘What I done tell you?’ he insisted. ‘What I done tell you? I knowed I got me a basses! One of ’em’s mine, ain’ it, Mister Pud? What I done tell —’

‘Shut up,’ commanded Tim breathlessly, ‘and get out of the way. Put your foot on that one, Pud! Gosh, they’re snarled up so’s we’ll *never* get ’em off!’

Snarled they were, indeed! Not only in Pud’s line and Harmon’s, but in Tim’s as well, for he had left his rod leaning against the engine and the flopping fish had already added his line to the others in which they were tangled! It took them a good five minutes to unravel the situation after the two bass had been finally subdued. Pud’s trophy was a whopper, weighing all of two pounds, while Harmon’s, though

fully as long, lacked in girth and so in weight. In the midst of the excitement Harmon discovered that one of the frogs had survived the ordeal and was hopping about underfoot, and with a yell he went after him, catching one bare foot in a coil of fish-line and coming a cropper against the fly-wheel. The frog, doubtless completely unnerved by recent experiences, gave way to panic and disappeared through a hole in the floor!

All thought of luncheon was gone now. The three went back to fishing, Pud resolved to duplicate his triumph, Tim determined not to be beaten, and Harmon hopeful of landing a 'basses' as big as Pud's. They had lost sight of their solitary neighbor during the recent period of agitation, but now they discovered him still motionless in the stern of the punt, as unheeding of their presence as ever. Pud would have liked to exhibit his catch and call attention to its size, but the neighbor seemed such an unfriendly chap that he hadn't the courage. They fished on for another hour without so much as a nibble, and by that time their hunger insisted on being attended to. So, while Tim took Harmon's pole, the latter prepared a hurried and rather sketchy repast of crackers and bananas and the last two bottles of tonic, and they ate with their several gazes fixed sternly

the while on the floats. Probably the preparations aboard the launch reminded the solitary occupant of the punt that it was time for dinner, for presently he took a tin box into his lap and fed slices of bread and what looked to be cold bacon to himself and the dog. He did not, though, try to combine eating with fishing, but carefully laid aside his pole, coiled his line on the floor, and hung the frog over the side between gunwale and water. So far as Pud could observe the man had never once glanced in the direction of the launch since the latter had arrived on the scene.

After their quick lunch, Pud, Tim, and Harmon went back in earnest to their fishing, but when the most of two hours had passed without so much as a nibble, they began to grow impatient. Pud was now on his third frog, having drowned his second, but the luck supposed to attach to Number Three failed him. The sun, although somewhat nearer the western horizon, seemed to glow even more fiercely than at noon. At last Pud said, *sotto voce*, to Tim: 'I'm going to ask him where's a good place to catch them.'

Tim glanced doubtfully across and shook his head. 'He's probably deaf,' he answered, 'but you can try.'

Pud tried. 'Mister, where's there another place to fish?' he called.

The man looked across at them slowly and, for a long moment, appeared disinclined to answer. Finally, though, he spoke in a thin, drawling voice. 'There's right smart o' fish up to Turtle Pond,' he said.

'Where is that?' inquired Pud.

'Close on three miles up yander.' The man waved a hand vaguely. 'I'd go there myself if I didn't have to row. Right good fishin, up there.'

'Bass?' asked Pud.

'Uh-huh; bass and pickerel. Big 'uns, too.'

'Do we go up this stream here?'

'Uh-huh, up Turtle Creek 'bout three miles. Right smart o' fish up there.'

They conferred. Pud had meant to inquire as to other fishing localities here in The Flat, but three miles wasn't far, and if there were more fish in Turtle Pond they might as well go there and try it. Besides, they had already decided to put in another day hereabouts and it would be well to find a camp-site soon, for the marshy border of The Flat held little invitation to them. So Harmon pulled up the anchor and, after several failures, Pud got the motor started. Turtle Creek led out of The Flat at the far end, and the launch went on past the two islands and was speedily lost to sight of the man in the punt. As the *chug-chug*

of the little engine died away, the man pulled up his own anchor and rowed to where the launch had floated. There he dropped the anchor back and settled himself again in the stern. As he did so he winked gravely at the yellow hound, and, while it sounds improbable, it really did look as if the hound winked back!

CHAPTER XIII

LOST!

TURTLE CREEK proved a shallow stream some forty feet in width at its outlet. Beyond the mouth the width varied considerably, but, in spite of an occasional snag or mud spit, there was always plenty of room. The bottom was plainly in sight, for the water seemed nowhere more than six feet deep. Because of the many twists and turns, Pud slowed the engine down and peered watchfully from the bow. Along the banks, not more than two feet above the stream, the bushes grew high and close, shutting them away from the slight breeze that had made existence on The Flat endurable. Tim perspired and protested, fanning himself with his hat. Of the three Harmon only was content. At intervals smaller streams flowed into the creek, sometimes hidden by overhanging vegetation, sometimes in full sight and so considerable as to width as to make it doubtful to Pud which was the main waterway. Those three miles seemed like six to them, and it was almost half-past four ere the creek swung lazily about and unexpectedly revealed a small pond of still, black water.

In size it was distinctly disappointing, for one could easily have thrown a baseball across it at its widest place. Connected with it, as they later discovered, were two other creeks. In shape it was as nearly round as any pond might be, with low margins and much pickerel-weed to engage the propeller. Pud voiced disgust, but Tim replied that maybe it was big enough to hold fish. As for Harmon, he already had his half-dead frog trailing in the water. It took some searching to find a depth of more than eight feet, but they finally succeeded and dropped anchor and went to fishing hopefully.

About six o'clock hope died and Pud and Tim took turns at telling what they thought of the veracity of the stranger in the punt. Not once had a hook been nosed at, not once had anything more than a dragon-fly stirred the placid surface. It was the stillest, most lonesome spot they had ever seen, and Pud gave it as his well-considered verdict that there wasn't a fish there, never had been and never would be. Harmon, viewing his pathetic bait dubiously and striving to make it show some sign of life by poking it with a finger, remarked that if he had some 'good ol' worms' he could get results. They fished on half-heartedly for a while longer and then gave up. Tim was the last to

quit, plainly disgruntled because he alone had failed to land anything.

It was now too late to seek further for a spot on which to spend the night, and fortunately a really ideal camp-site lay before them in the shape of a hummock sparsely clad with a few discouraged-looking pines. It was almost free of undergrowth and carpeted with coarse grass and brown needles. There was just room for the tent and a fireplace in front, and after they had finally pushed the bow of the launch to within jumping distance of dry land they disembarked and proceeded to make camp. Harmon had to hunt long before he had accumulated enough wood to carry them along until bedtime, but he succeeded at last, and soon there was a fragrant fire burning. The two bass were cleaned and fried, and, as the sun sank behind the marshes to the west, three very hungry boys squatted down around the fire and had the best meal of the cruise. They felt far more cheerful after supper, and while Harmon cleaned up and rebuilt the fire, and while Pud stretched lazily out on a blanket, Tim fished from the stern of the launch in about three feet of water and, just as darkness fell, pulled forth a twelve-inch pickerel. Until he got it to the light of the fire he wasn't sure what it was, and feared it might prove to be an eel! His triumph

was expressed loudly and at length, and he would have gone back to the launch for more pickerel if Pud hadn't forbidden it!

If Turtle Pond was silent by daylight, so soon as darkness had well fallen it made up for it by becoming seemingly alive with strange and mysterious sounds. Two owls held a weird and monotonous conversation in the near distance, deep-voiced frogs called pessimistically to each other about the pond, faint squeaks came from the rushes, and in the bushes twigs snapped and stealthy rustlings were heard. It would have been worse than idle to have tried to induce Harmon to sleep outside the tent, and so he was permitted inside without discussion. Undressing, Pud came on the letter he had written in the morning, still unmailed, and he sighed discouragedly. In spite of the best intentions in the world, he had thus far dispatched but one missive to his parents; and this was the fourth night of their trip!

It wasn't easy to get to sleep. Conversation languished, died away, and commenced again. They made plans for the morrow and remade them. One thing they were unanimous about, and that was to get back to The Flat as soon as they could. Silence had held the tent for quite five minutes when Pud again spoke.

'Say, Tim, I'll tell you one thing.'

'What?' asked Tim sleepily.

'You won't ever catch me lying.'

'Oh, I don't know,' the other murmured, 'you aren't such a smart liar!'

'I mean I'm not going to tell lies,' said Pud energetically. 'I — I've had my lesson.'

Tim chuckled. 'Wait till you get home and begin telling about that bass you caught!'

'I mean it,' Pud insisted seriously. 'Just look at that girl, Gladys Evinrude! My goodness, Tim, she was enough to cure that fellow in the Bible, Anna — I forget his name.'

'Why, she was just — just imaginative, Pud!'

'Imaginative, my eye! Anyway, you couldn't believe a word she said, and if she got that way from reading too many stories I'm going to quit reading! She — gee, she was the limit!'

'Oh, I dare say she was all right other ways,' muttered Tim charitably. 'Go to sleep, can't you?'

'All right. But I'd like to know whether she got that licking!'

They awoke to find the world wet and gray, with a soft, mistlike rain falling. The difficulty experienced in getting a fire started with only damp wood for fuel and the consequent wait for breakfast depressed them. Matters were made no better when they embarked in a boat whose

every surface gleamed with water. They had eaten Tim's pickerel, and, since the fire had been weak, eaten it in a somewhat underdone condition, and Pud had felt squirmy ever since. On the whole it was a low-spirited trio who set forth through a silver-gray void to find their way out of Turtle Pond. Twice they thought they had discovered the outlet and twice they were forced to back hurriedly out of the entangling weeds. At last, though, they found the stream and headed safely into it. There wasn't much to be seen save bedraggled shrubs along the banks or an occasional clump of trees. The fine rain fell silently and ceaselessly. They had progressed slowly the matter of a mile and a half, perhaps, when Harmon broke the depressed silence.

'Look yonder, Mister Pud,' he exclaimed. 'See 'at big tree 'at's leanin' over!'

'Yes, what about it?'

'I ain' see no such tree like 'at when we comes in here.'

'We-ell, I don't think I did, either,' answered Pud, 'but I guess it was there.'

The tree in question, seen vaguely through the grayness ahead, leaned at an angle of some forty-five degrees across the stream, and it did seem strange that none of them recalled seeing it before. Tim voiced the growing conviction

of all when, viewing it from beneath, he said: 'This isn't the way we came up, Pud.'

'Well, I don't know,' replied Pud doubtfully. 'Maybe that tree fell over last night.'

'It might have, but this creek's different. It doesn't twist about so much, for one thing; we've been going pretty straight for 'most a mile, I guess; and it's deeper; you can't see the bottom nearly so plain.'

'Of course not, when it's raining. What do you say, Harmon?'

'I reckon we done got los', answered Harmon simply.

'Lost, my eye! Even if this isn't the way we came, it's bound to lead back to the river. I guess we got mixed up back there and took the stream that led out of the pond over to the left of where we fished, Tim. Anyway, the current's going the way we're going, and so it must lead back to the river.'

Tim wasn't sure that Pud was right about the current, and there was so little of it that Pud couldn't prove his assertion until he had stopped the launch. Then, as it continued slowly on in the direction it had been going, and as a piece of cardboard dropped over by Tim floated in the same way, the question seemed decided. Ten minutes later the stream branched, and Pud, about to choose the left

branch as naturally the correct one, was surprised to find the current flowing toward him at the mouth. He stopped the boat and they made certain of it. The left-hand stream flowed into the one they were in. That was puzzling, since according to their sense of direction the right-hand stream would lead them farther northward, and they wanted to go south!

They discussed the matter for several minutes while the launch, still flying a bedraggled pirate flag from the stern, nestled against the wet bushes. In the end they reached the decision that, for all they knew, what seemed to them north might well be south. No one could remember which way they had started from the camping spot. If they had unwittingly taken the stream leading eastward, what seemed to them to be north would really be south. If the sun had been shining they could have solved the riddle easily enough. And so they could had there been a compass aboard, but a compass was one thing — almost the only thing, one might have thought — they hadn't brought along.

It seemed the safest course to follow the current, since as Pud, not knowing River Swamp, argued, the current must lead toward the river. They took the right-hand stream and went on. In the course of the next two

miles they passed several smaller waterways, all, they judged, flowing into the present one, and gradually the stream grew wider. The engine began to sputter about ten o'clock and, in spite of Pud's earnest endeavors to find the trouble, went dead in one cylinder. They hobbled along for another mile, and then Pud ran up to a bank and sent Harmon ashore with a line. To alleviate their troubles somewhat the rain almost ceased and the gray became an opaline whiteness that seemed to promise clearing.

Striving to recall all that Andy Tremble had told them about the engine, the two boys started methodically to work. Pud reported a gasoline tank more than half full. Tim examined the carburetor gingerly and gave it a clean bill of health. Together they went at the battery and followed the wires back. Then out came the spark plugs and were frowned over and cleaned. And finally, being put together again, the engine displayed no inclination to start until Pud had thrice primed it. Then it did start half-heartedly and, as before, on one cylinder. Only, and this they were both certain of, it was now the other cylinder!

They had occupied an hour and had gained nothing, and so the launch was unmoored and they went on again. Pud scowled at the sound of the exhaust and he and Tim discussed the

possibility of damage from running on one cylinder. But there appeared nothing else to do but keep on, and so they kept on. The sun threatened once or twice to break through, but each time it changed its mind. However, the rain had practically stopped, and they discarded rubber coats. So far they had passed no one on their way, nor had they so much as glimpsed a house, but now, out of the pearly distance, appeared ahead what was without doubt a human habitation.

'We'll stop and ask them where we are,' said Pud.

The habitation, seen closer, was only a shanty, rickety and unpainted. A path led to a log which doubtless answered as a landing, although no boat was in sight. Pud steered the launch to the log and Tim, who had volunteered for the duty, stepped suspiciously onto it and leaped to shore. The cabin looked deserted, but a few tattered garments hung on a line at one side and an axe was buried in a chopping-block close to the door. So Tim raised his voice and said 'Hello!' As there was no answer, he said it a second time, pausing, undecided whether to knock on the tightly closed door in front or make his way around to the back. This time there came an answer, but not of the sort he had expected.

Something that sounded like a hornet sped past him and went whining off across the stream, and a sharp report came from the bushes behind the house. Tim, amazed, stood stock-still and stared until Pud's voice reached him and galvanized him into action.

'Run, you chump!' shouted Pud. *'They're shooting at you!'*

Then Tim ran.

He spurned the log altogether and landed half in and half out of the launch, his feet dangling in the water. Pud jerked at the clutch and the boat limped on its way. Harmon, reaching up from a place of safety, pulled the rest of Tim over the gunwale. Pud, at the bow, making himself as small as possible, peered ahead at intervals and then back toward the cabin, all the time wondering how it would feel to have a bullet land between his shoulders. But the next shot went far overhead, singing past before the short *crack* of the rifle reached them. Looking back, Pud saw a lean form in a calico dress and a faded blue cotton sun-bonnet emerge from the bushes at the left of the cabin and stand for a moment peering after them. She held a long-barreled gun in one hand while to the other clung a child of three or four years.

'Gee,' muttered Pud, *'a woman!'*

There was a throaty chuckle from Harmon. 'My golly, Mister Tim, I reckon it was plum' lucky for you the ol' man ain' to home!' he said.

'I guess,' observed Pud, resuming the seat, 'she didn't try to hit us. All she was doing was frightening us off. Maybe she thought we were revenue officers or sheriffs or something.'

'Plaguy old frump!' sputtered Tim, his nerves still unsteady. 'She ought to be arrested!'

'That's so,' Pud agreed. 'We'll go back and you can make believe you're an officer and —'

'Oh, shut up,' grunted Tim, coming forth from concealment and staring vindictively back at the now distant cabin. 'It's all right for you to laugh, Pud Pringle, but you didn't feel that bullet whiz right past your ear!'

'Folks 'roun' these here parts seems mighty onsoci'ble,' observed Harmon. 'Reckon they done heard we's pirates, Mr. Pud?'

They reached a second domicile a little later, slightly more pretentious, having a tumble-down porch across the front, but they not only did not stop to make inquiries, but they went by in complete silence save for the unrhythmical coughing of the invalid engine. Hunger overtook them well short of noon, for breakfast had been an unsatisfactory meal, and they drew

up beside a fairly clear hummock and had dinner. The steak that they had purchased the day before was decidedly odoriferous when Harmon drew it forth from a locker and Pud and Tim viewed it with deep suspicion and with highly elevated noses. Tim advised throwing it away, but Harmon assured them that it was a perfectly good piece of meat.

'Jus' you-all wait till I scrape it nice an' wash it, Mister Tim. Why, my lawsey, 'at ain' *ol'*, 'at's jus' seasoned!'

It certainly tasted delicious when, Harmon having cut it into three portions in the hot frying-pan and laid a portion on as many tin plates, they sampled it doubtfully. Tim was exceedingly glad his advice had not been acted on. They had boiled potatoes and some rather stale bread and much steaming hot tea with the steak, and they ended up with cake and bananas. And after that no one appeared to be in any hurry to go on. Pud hazarded the opinion that they had accomplished about seven miles since morning, even allowing for stops and the disabled engine, but Tim's judgment knocked off a mile. Both agreed, though, that they ought to reach the river very soon.

Tim rescued a piece of scorched paper from the edge of the fire and, with a burnt stick, drew a map purporting to prove conclusively

that the river when found would be the Little Fox. But as his lines were not very clear, and as the same applied to his explanation, Pud was unconvinced. Pud believed they would come out first of all on Two-Pond Run somewhere south of Swamp Hole and would have to go down Two-Pond Run a considerable distance before they arrived back at The Flat.

'The way it looks to me,' he said, 'we've been sort of circling around, first west and then north, and now kind of west again, and if that's right we're bound to come into Two-Pond Run pretty quick.'

'Please, sir, Mister Pud,' said Harmon earnestly, 'don' you-all take me nigh that there Swump Hole. They ain' got no use for colored folkses roun' there, sir!'

'Well, I guess we won't get very close to it,' replied Pud.

But his voice lacked conviction, and Harmon continued to look troubled. As Pud and Tim could not make their theories agree, they gave up the attempt after a while and the voyage was continued. The stream was now more than twice as wide as it had been at Turtle Pond and there were occasional indications of a stronger current. The launch, in spite of its handicap of one cylinder, was making appreciably better time. The stream took on many turns, some of

them surprisingly abrupt, and Pud had his hands full. At last, without warning, the stream ceased to be and they were out on a long and narrow lake whose farther end was lost in gray mist. Silent and unruffled, it stretched away between wooded shores. Across from them, to the right, a close forest of trees formed a dark wall. Sparsely clothed at their tops with feathery green, their long straight trunks descended into the dark water, there bulging out hugely. Pud, having silenced the motor, turned to Tim, beside him.

‘Know where we are?’ he asked in a strangely small voice.

Tim shook his head, staring about him uneasily.

‘Cypress Lake,’ said Pud.

CHAPTER XIV

ON CYPRESS LAKE

THE launch floated out into the lake, only the ripples from its bow marring the flat monotony of the glassy surface. About them on every side were silence and solitude, uncanny in their completeness. The gray mist filled the distances and hung wraith-like about the borders. No fish broke water, no bird called from the enclosing forest. Behind them the outlet of the creek was already losing its identity, ahead the lake stretched away like a broad river, between straight lines of shore, nowhere more than a quarter of a mile in width, until its somber water became lost in the mist.

‘Golly, if this ain’ jus’ about the mos’ lonesomest place I ever seen!’

Harmon was the first to break the silence, causing Tim to start nervously.

‘Well,’ said Pud, attempting a business-like tone, ‘there’s one thing certain. We don’t want to camp around here! And, even if the fish are as big as they say they are, I’m not hankering for any of them!’

‘I guess,’ said Tim, looking distastefully at

the water about, 'the only things that would live in this lake would be eels and horn-pouts. Gosh, it's a creepy old hole, ain't it? Let's get out.'

'Yes, but how?' asked Pud. 'I mean where? There's no sense bucking that current all the way back to Turtle Pond. I suppose there's a way out if we can find it. It's probably up at the farther end somewhere. Generally lakes are like that. It's only about twenty to four, and so we've got plenty of time. Wouldn't you think there'd be some one fishing here, some one we could ask, eh?'

'No,' replied Tim decidedly, 'I wouldn't. I wouldn't fish here for fifty dollars.'

'You wouldn't probably catch fifty dollars if you did,' said Pud, in a weak attempt at a joke. 'Well, let's start her up again and see if we can find the way out.'

Thirty minutes later they were about twenty feet from where they had been when Pud made the above proposal. In other words, the *Kismet* — *Jolly Rodger* — *Vengeance* simply refused to budge. They did all the usual things and a great many novel ones; and they turned the wheel over and over until every one's back ached. For once even Harmon's magic failed. To add to the unpleasantness of their predicament, the rain began to drizzle down again and

they went back to rubber coats; and every one knows what awkward affairs rubber coats can prove in such circumstances. Every time Tim leaned down to give the fly-wheel another hopeless revolution he stepped on a corner of his coat and so only succeeded in turning the wheel halfway. With the rain came another degree or two of dimness, a sort of gray twilight that added to the depression of their spirits. They sat themselves down on the wet seats and stared at the engine which, now once more yellow with rust, seemed to stare malignantly back. Finally Tim spoke, bitterly and accusingly.

‘Your father never ought to have let us start out in a boat like this,’ he said.

Pud turned upon him angrily, started to make a retort, and closed his lips resolutely. Some things were too absurd to deserve an answer! Tim, still gloomily regarding the two rusty cylinders, went on.

‘If you’d only had sense enough to bring a pair of oars we could have rowed back,’ he announced.

Pud laughed harshly. ‘Oh, sure,’ he agreed with deep sarcasm. ‘That would be easy, wouldn’t it? With no oar-locks! And against that current! And the stream so narrow in places — Oh, shut up! You make me tired!’

Tim turned a slightly startled gaze to his

chum. He hadn't suspected that Pud was getting angry. After all, it was a mean thing to crab. It wasn't Pud's fault. Tim arose apologetically and turned the wheel over four times. Then he seated himself again across from Pud and said: 'I guess you're right. Oars wouldn't be any good.'

'Of course they wouldn't,' said Pud, slightly mollified. 'I guess the only thing to do is take no notice of that blamed engine for a while and then try again. Motor-boat engines are queer things, and sometimes they come around all right if you pay no attention to 'em.'

'If we had us a good ol' pole,' said Harmon, 'we could get us out o' here, I reckon.'

'There's the boat-hook,' suggested Tim, 'if we haven't lost it.'

'It's here,' announced Harmon, 'but it ain' long enough. Reckon this here's mighty deep water.'

'I've heard folks say there wasn't any bottom at all some places,' said Tim awedly.

'Pshaw, that's foolishness,' replied Pud. 'if there wasn't any bottom how'd the water stay in here? But a pole wouldn't get us very far. Even if we had three poles we wouldn't reach the end of the pond before dark. No, sir, if we can't get the engine going we'll just have to spend the night right where we are.'

A depressed silence greeted the announcement. Then Tim remarked, 'Well, I'd a heap rather stay here than go ashore!'

'Oh, I guess nothing would hurt us,' said Pud with assumed cheerfulness.

'I ain' goin' ashore,' declared Harmon emphatically. 'No, sir, I ain'! There's hants and ghos'es 'roun' here, Mister Pud.'

'Oh, shucks, Harmon! You shut up about your ghosts. I've told you there isn't any such thing as a ghost, haven't I?'

'Yes, you done tol' me all right, Mister Pud, but you ain' never seen —'

'That'll do for you!' said Pud sternly. 'Gee, as if we didn't have enough trouble without you always raking up your old ghosts and haunts!'

Silence followed. The rain lessened, became a mist once more, almost ceased. The lake lightened perceptibly. Pud looked at his watch. It was now twenty-five after four. 'Let's eat some crackers,' he suggested. 'Then we'll try her again.'

The crackers were all right, but they produced a thirst, and there was nothing drinkable aboard save condensed milk. Tim absolutely refused to drink the lake water at first, but, after Pud and Harmon had both pronounced it warm but sweet, he yielded and quenched his thirst, predicting, though, that it would prob-

ably give him typhoid fever and result in his untimely death. To which gloomy prophecy Pud replied that, as they had all drank it, they would probably die together.

Cheered and invigorated by the modest repast, they returned to another prolonged argument with the engine, an argument that proved entirely one-sided and left them about where they had started. At intervals it misted, and steadily the desolate scene about them grew dimmer and more mysterious as evening approached. Harmon, when not taking his turn at the fly-wheel or performing one of a half-hundred commands made by Pud and Tim, spent his time staring apprehensively at the nearer shore, where, as the darkness crept stealthily forth from the thick woods, the mist that hung along the margin made for his willing imagination weird shapes and shadows. At last they acknowledged defeat, and, rather than drift to the shore during the night, Pud tossed over the anchor. The splash of it awoke a dozen echoes from the shores. Out and out went the light line, the boys staring in astonishment. Then, with a jerk, it stopped because there was no more of it, and still it descended straight from the bow.

'Gee,' muttered Pud, 'there's thirty-six feet of it, and that anchor hasn't touched!'

‘I told you there wasn’t any bottom!’ exclaimed Tim, drawing uneasily away from the edge of the launch.

‘Pshaw, thirty-six feet isn’t so deep for a lake,’ muttered Pud.

‘It isn’t? I’d like to know where there’s a lake up our way that’s more than twenty!’

‘Well, what of it? This isn’t up our way. I guess there are lakes out West and up in British Columbia and — and Alaska that are hundreds of feet deep! Well, anyway, there’s no use leaving it out, I guess. Might as well pull it up again, eh?’

‘No, leave it there,’ said Tim. ‘If we drift into shallower water it will catch and hold us. Gosh, Pud, we can’t be more than eighty feet from that shore there. Think of the water being as deep as it is! Must go down mighty sudden, eh?’

‘Yes, it must slope right off. Say, you’d get awfully fooled if you went in bathing over there and started to wade out, wouldn’t you?’ Tim agreed, with a shudder, that you would! ‘Gee, I wish it would stop raining — or something!’ continued Pud, staring disconsolately about him into the gathering twilight. ‘It’s going to get dark awfully early to-night, Tim. Maybe we’d better be thinking about something to eat pretty soon. We can have some canned beans —’

‘Cold?’ asked Tim without enthusiasm.

‘Well, we can’t make a fire on board, can we? I say, though, where’s that stove of dad’s?’

‘In the bag there, but you have to have alcohol for it, don’t you? And we haven’t got any, have we?’

‘That’s so. I meant to get some, but forgot it. Well, we’ll just have to eat cold food for once. Unless ’— he winked at Tim then — ‘we let Harmon go ashore and cook something.’

‘No, sir, Mister Pud, I ain’ goin’ to!’ wailed Harmon. ‘Mister Pud, please, sir, don’ you-all make me!’

‘He’s just fooling,’ said Tim hastily. ‘I guess cold beans will be good enough. I’m not much hungry, anyway.’

‘You will be before you go to bed,’ said Pud. ‘Harmon, you see what we’ve got to eat there. My goodness, I wish we could just have some hot tea! I’m wet right through.’

‘It’s getting cooler, too,’ murmured Tim. ‘I’ll bet it’ll be awfully cold on this lake before morning, Pud. I wish —’

‘I hears a boat!’ said Harmon in a hoarse whisper. ‘Yander, Mister Pud, up-lake! You lis’en an’ —’

‘Well, shut up so I can listen then. That’s right! I can hear the oars!’

'You reckon they's bogey-mens?' asked Harmon.

'I hear voices,' said Tim. 'Shall we shout?'

'I guess we'd better wait,' said Pud doubtfully. 'They're coming this way.'

The sound of oars was plainly heard now, and once or twice a voice came to them, but after listening for several minutes it was apparent that the boat was not coming toward them, but was crossing the lake, probably diagonally, a half-mile or so away, heading, it seemed, for the cypress shore. Once Pud thought he caught a momentary glimpse of the boat in the gray void, but he could not be certain.

'We'd better shout, I guess,' he said, and did so. For a space there was no response, although he shouted 'Hallo!' several times. Finally, though, a hail came back to them.

'What you want?' called an impatient voice.

'Help,' replied Pud promptly. 'Our engine's broken down and we want to get out of here!'

Another silence, as though the occupants of the boat were of two minds as to rendering the requested assistance. Then at last the voice spoke again, and the words sounded heavy with suspicion. 'Who are you? What you doin' up here?'

'We're from Millville,' answered Pud. 'Three

boys. We lost our way this morning and got in here by mistake.'

'Boys, eh?' The voice was lower and had lost its quality of doubt. 'All right, we're comin'. Keep a shoutin' so's we can locate you.' The oars sounded once more, growing louder, and, as Pud called at intervals, a shadowy form emerged from the mist and took shape as it drew nearer, resolving at last into a small skiff and two men, one at the oars and the other huddled in the stern.

'Motor-boat, hey?' inquired the latter occupant. 'Ain't out of gas, are you?'

'No, we've got half a tankful. I don't know what the trouble is. One cylinder went back on us this morning and now she won't start at all.'

As he spoke, Pud was reflecting that the two middle-aged men who were slowly becoming recognizable as such were not at all the sort of persons he would ordinarily ask assistance of. They were, he decided uncomfortably, about as villainous-looking a pair as he had ever seen! They were bearded and tanned and generally weathered as to face, roughly clothed as to body, and entirely unprepossessing as to general appearance. The man who rowed wore a dilapidated leather coat, from which the water trickled as he moved his long arms back and forth, a rusty felt hat and gray trousers that

were rolled well above his bare ankles to keep them from the water that swished about in the bottom of the leaky boat. The man in the stern looked a degree more ragged, his shoulders covered with an old fertilizer bag still eloquent of its former use, and his cotton trousers stuffed into a pair of high-laced boots much the worse for wear. A sodden straw hat dripped rain from its down-pulled brim. The man in the stern was heavy-set, with a bulbous nose and small twinkling eyes, and his name, as later developed, was 'Cocker.' His companion was taller, with broad shoulders and long limbs. His nose was long and hooked and his staring eyes were crossed. He answered to the name of 'Lank.'

'Well,' said Cocker as the boat drew alongside the launch, 'Lank here's the very feller you're a-lookin' for. He knows more about gasoline engines and machinery —'

'Shut your yap,' said Lank savagely. Then, to Harmon, who was peering interestedly over the side, 'Here, take this painter, Nigger, and make it fast. I'll have a look at your engine, Mister. What make's it?' He climbed aboard, followed by the man in the bow, and stretched as he looked curiously about him. 'Nice boat you've got,' he said approvingly. 'Can she go?'

'You mean fast?' asked Pud. 'No, not very.'

'Six miles, I dare say.'

'Nearer five,' answered Pud. 'She gets there, though — usually.'

'Usually's good,' laughed the man grimly. 'Well, let's see what's wrong with the old wheezer.' He set to work very knowingly, throwing the fly-wheel over thrice experimentally, examining the carburetor, and then unscrewing the plugs. Meanwhile the heavy-set Cocker roamed about, his eyes studying everything most intently. Tim, watching, looked very uneasy. He liked the appearance of the visitors as little as did Pud.

'Got it,' announced Lank presently. 'Broken wire here. No spark, or not much of a one.' He drew forth a knife and made the repair deftly. 'Got some tape?' he inquired. Pud furnished a roll, and a moment later Lank directed: 'All right, son. Try her now.'

Pud gave her a half-turn and she answered instantly. Lank laughed his satisfaction. 'Didn't think to look at your wiring, I'll bet,' he said derisively. 'Well, maybe you wouldn't have found the break if you had. It *looked* all right. Which way you boys travelin'?'

'South,' said Pud promptly. 'Where do we get out of this lake?'

'Well, there's two ways,' replied the tall

stranger, seating himself. 'There's Flat Water Creek up at the north end that'll take you to Fox River. It's about four miles to the river, I'd say. Then it's about ten miles down to The Flat.'

'Gee,' muttered Pud, 'fourteen miles!'

'Sure, but there's a shorter way than that, son. Over yonder's Cypress Branch, and that'll land you in Two-Mile Creek back of Swamp Hole. Only thing is, you'd never find the branch, I reckon. Think they would, Cockey?'

'Not 'les' we showed 'em. Not as dark as it is now, I'd say.'

'No, you see it's over there in them cypress, an' if you don't know where to look for it you'd never find it, son. But we're goin' down the branch and we'll show you the way, if you ain't objectin' to comp'ny.'

CHAPTER XV

SET ADRIFT

'No,' said Pud, 'we'd be glad to have you, of course.'

'Spoke like a gentleman,' approved Cocker. 'Here, you Rastus, carry this painter back and make it fast to the stern cleat.'

Harmon obeyed none too amiably and Pud and Tim lifted the anchor. A hoarse laugh from Cocker called the boys' attention to the fact that he had pulled the flag-pole from the socket and was spreading the wet folds of the flag for Lank's benefit. 'Well, sir, looky here! If it ain't the old Jolly Roger! Lank, this here's a pirate craft we're on!'

Lank only nodded, and beckoned to Pud. 'All right, son,' he said. 'Head her yonder till we pick up our landmark.'

Pud took the wheel and the launch set off into the mist, bearing diagonally toward the cypress swamp. Lank stood at his back, whistling a queer little tune through his teeth. Cocker, having tossed the flag to the deck, lifted a fold of the tent and inspected it. Then he opened a locker here and there and peered

inside. Tim and Harmon watched him disapprovingly.

'Pretty well fixed for a cruise, ain't you?' he asked. 'Tent an' everything, eh? Plenty of victuals, too, likely. Well, well, solid comfort I call it.' He grinned leeringly. 'Nice little boat you got, fellers. Belong to you, does it?'

'It belongs to his father.' Tim indicated Pud, at the wheel.

'That so? You come from Livermore?'

'No, Millville, about thirty miles up-river.'

Pud heard this much, and then Lank was speaking. 'There we are,' said the latter. 'See that cypress with the broken limb? Head up about twenty feet beyond it and keep away from shore till you see the opening.' The dark wall of trees loomed closely through the twilight now, the water showing far backward between the swollen trunks, black and mysterious. On this side, the lake shallowed slowly to meet the cypress swamp, and it was necessary to follow the shore well out from the fringe of trees before turning toward the stream. At last Lank gave the word and Pud doubtfully turned the boat's nose shoreward. But a moment later he saw that there was an opening between the cypress trees about twelve feet wide, and into this the launch slowly chugged.

'How much does she draw?' asked Lank.

'I don't know exactly,' replied Pud. 'Not more than eighteen inches, I guess.'

'She'll make it then. Better let me take her through this stretch. There's a lot of turns, and if you don't know where they are you're likely to get snagged.' Pud resigned the wheel and stood by, watching curiously as the stranger steered the boat dexterously through the narrow stream. The latter turned a dozen times before it emerged from the gloom of the cypress woods, but fortunately none of the turns were abrupt. It was a weird and desolate place, that swamp. Looking upward, Pud could see dimly the feathery tops of the trees merging into the gray mist. On every side the funereal trunks were crowded close together and but little light filtered down to the black water about them. Dead branches protruded in strange and uncanny shapes, and some aquatic growth powdered the surface with infinitesimal green leaves. It was a trifle lighter on the stream and its course lay like a lead-gray ribbon ahead and behind. Save for an infrequent voice from the boat the silence was absolute, oppressive. They were all glad when the launch floated at last between banks of marsh grass and the gray twilight took the place of the deeper gloom of the forest.

Lank yielded the wheel to Pud. 'Straight

sailin' now,' he said, 'and plenty of water under your keel.'

'Is this Two-Pond Run?' Pud inquired.

'Tain't called that yet, but the Run's only a mile or so ahead.'

'Do you live around here?'

'Well, no, not 'round here exactly. We're sort of visitin'. Fishin' a bit, you know. Didn't have any luck to-day, though.'

Pud started to say that he hadn't noticed either lines or poles in the skiff that was floating along behind, but thought better of it. Instead, 'I've heard the fish were pretty big in Cypress Lake,' he observed.

'Big? Yes, they're big, but they're mighty shy. Swamp Pond's more to my taste, but that's fished a lot. The Swampers keep that pretty clean.'

'Which way is Swamp Hole from here?' asked Pud.

Lank waved a big hand over the port bow. 'Yonder,' he answered, 'about two-three miles. If I was you I'd keep clear of it, son. Some of them Swampers are kind o' tough individuals.'

'Well, if we go down Two-Pond Run do we keep away from the Hole?'

'Pretty well. There's a few cabins this side the Run, but I guess no one won't bother you if you just keep on rowin'.'

'Rowing?' echoed Pud.

'I meant goin'. My mistake, son. Well, yonder's where we leave you. Just ease up against the bank to your left when we get to the branch.' Not far ahead the stream forked, and Pud called to Tim to slow her down and, finally, to stop. The launch nestled up against a bank and Cocker led the skiff around to the side.

'Well,' he said, 'the best of friends must part, as the old song has it. We're sorry to have you leave us, but I guess you'll be wantin' to get along toward home before it gets much darker. Come on, Mistah Johnson, step aboard.' He took Harmon by the shoulder and shoved him ungently toward the skiff.

'Take your han's off me, Mister!' protested the darky. 'What you-all aimin' to do?'

'Shut your black mouth and pile into that boat,' said Lank grimly. 'Come on, now, the rest o' you!'

'But we're not going in that skiff!' declared Pud stoutly. 'We're going on down in this launch.'

'No, you ain't neither,' answered Cocker. 'We've swapped boats with you. Mind you, we wasn't keen for doin' it, but you insisted, an' —'

'Better give 'em a couple o' dollars to boot,'

said Lank. 'They might claim we cheated 'em.'

'That's so!' Cocker fished a bunch of dirty money from a pocket and selected two bills. 'Here you are, sonny. A fine rowboat and two dollars for your launch. There's some that wouldn't trade so easy, but me and Lank was always sort o' soft-hearted.'

Pud pushed the greasy bills away, trying to smile, although his heart was somewhere down in his shoes. 'I guess you've made a mistake,' he said. 'We haven't traded the launch to you. We couldn't, because it isn't ours to trade!'

'Now don't you try to go back on a bargain,' remonstrated Cocker reprovingly. "'Tain't honorable, sonny.' He laid a broad hand on Pud's arm and stuffed the money into a pocket. Then he propelled him to the side. 'Climb over now, 'cause we got to be shovin' ahead. No nonsense, neither, or' — he placed a huge fist an inch from Pud's nose — 'you'll get this side o' the jaw, see!'

'Cut out that stuff,' growled Lank. 'The kid's all right. Let him alone.'

Pud turned hopefully to the speaker. 'He's fooling, isn't he?' he gulped. 'He can't take this launch away from us! We've got all our things here, and —'

'You do like we're tellin' you,' advised Lank coldly.

'But — but you'll give her back to me, won't you?'

'Oh, sure,' agreed Cocker heartily. 'We're just borrowin' it. Thought you knew that.'

'Well — when?'

'Oh, most any day, I guess. Want we should send it parcel post or express?' Cocker laughed hoarsely at his humor and then broke off to lift Harmon swiftly from his feet and drop him into the bottom of the skiff. 'Get in there!' he ordered angrily. 'Be quick about it or I'll throw you all in! Come on, snap into it!'

Pud looked miserably at Tim and found no encouragement to further resistance. Tim was plainly frightened and was already climbing onto the seat. Pud choked down a lump in his throat and spoke with commendable calm. 'All right,' he said. 'But you needn't think you can get away with this. You're stealing my —'

'Shut your face and get into that skiff,' threatened Cocker savagely, 'or I'll kick you in!'

Pud followed Tim, and Lank tossed the painter down after him. 'Sorry, son,' said the latter with gruff kindness, 'but we have to do it. Keep down that stream yonder and you'll come out in The Flat. Good luck! Clear out now, and —'

'Mind this,' growled Cocker, scowling down

at them, 'don't you come sneakin' back, 'cause if you do we'll put a bullet into you, and don't make no mistake!'

Tim had already found the oars and now he began to row hurriedly across to the farther stream. Pud, tears of mortification in his eyes, watched the launch fade away in the darkness a blurred white blotch until the bank hid it from sight. Tim pulled hard at the oars and, although no skillful waterman, soon had the skiff well on its way. No one spoke for several minutes. Then, as it often happened, it was Harmon who broke the silence.

'Reckon 'em folkses knows a heap more about piratin' 'an what we does,' he said sorrowfully.

Neither Pud nor Tim seemed to be able to think of a suitable reply to this statement and they went on until Tim, becoming exhausted, caught a crab that almost landed him on his back.

'Let me row,' said Pud, and they changed places. Again silence fell like a pall. The stream was wide and easy to follow even in the dusk that was fast swallowing up the world. Small trees were interspersed with bushes atop the low banks and these had already lost detail, were black silhouettes against the grayer darkness of the sky. The rain had stopped, but a

foglike mist still hung over River Swamp. The boys were damp and chill, hungry and discouraged. Finally Tim spoke from his place in the stern.

‘Those men aren’t Swamp-Holers, Pud.’

‘I know,’ answered the other wearily. ‘He told me, the tall one. They’re just visiting, he said.’

‘I think they’re town folks,’ Tim went on. ‘They didn’t talk like folks around here, though sometimes it seemed as if they were trying to. And one of them wore a leather coat, Pud. You wouldn’t see a leather coat around the Swamp in a thousand years, I guess.’

‘No, I guess not,’ said Pud. His tone, though, suggested that he was not greatly interested in his chum’s remarks. He rowed on, his strokes growing weaker, and then suddenly he swung the skiff’s nose toward the bank.

‘What you doing?’ asked Tim. ‘Look out, or —’

‘I’m going back,’ said Pud firmly. ‘I’m just not going to let them have her, Tim!’ He backed water and headed the skiff upstream as he spoke. ‘No, sir, they can’t do that to me! I — I won’t let ’em!’

‘Well — well —’ sputtered Tim in alarm. ‘Well, what can you do, Pud? My gracious goodness, we can’t go back there and have them

shoot us like they said they would, Pud! Why, my goodness —'

'How you know they got a gun?' asked Harmon from the bow. 'I ain' seen no gun.'

'They've got one, all right,' insisted Tim. 'And they wouldn't hesitate to use it, I guess!'

'That's all right,' said Pud, rowing hard again. 'I'm not asking you to get shot, Tim. I don't intend to let them see me, but I'm going to find out where my boat is, and if they leave it alone a minute I bet I'll get it back!'

'Yes, but — but now you look here, Pud Pringle! The best way to do is go right on down to — to somewhere and tell the police about it! Gosh, I guess it won't take the police long to get your launch back!'

'Maybe it won't take me long, neither,' answered Pud grimly. 'All I'm asking those fellows to do is just leave it alone for about two minutes. That's all I'm asking them!'

'Well, yes, but — but how do you know where they've gone? My goodness, Pud, we can't row all over this old swamp looking for them! And suppose they take it into Swamp Hole! I guess it wouldn't be very healthy to follow them in there!'

'I'm going back where they put us out,' said Pud resolutely, 'and see if it's still there. If it

isn't I'm going to row until —' But he paused there. 'Well, anyway, I'm going to find my boat,' he concluded a trifle lamely.

Tim was silent, torn between his loyalty to Pud and a strong and growing disinclination to present himself as a target to the blood-thirsty Cocker. Harmon said wistfully, more to himself than the others: 'Wish I had my good ol' knife!'

Rowing against the current, sluggish though it was, soon began to tell on Pud's arms and shoulders. The skiff, awash with water in the bottom, was old and decrepit, and the oars were mismated besides, one being wider of blade than the other and at least two inches longer. But Pud pulled on, breathing hard, feeling that a request for assistance would go ill with the heroic rôle he had assumed. Finally the junction of the Run with the second stream appeared in the darkness ahead and Tim announced the fact to Pud in a voice that held no joy of discovery. Pud stopped rowing and looked over his shoulder. Then he paddled silently forward to where he could see the place where the launch had lain. It was empty. He wasn't greatly disappointed, though, for he had felt pretty certain that the men had gone on in it down that side stream, perhaps to some cabin near by, perhaps all the way to Swamp

Hole. He swung the boat around the point and let it drift against the bank there.

'I guess you fellows had better get out here,' he announced. 'I'll go on a ways and see if I can't find the launch. I guess you can find a good dry place, and you can light a fire if you like. I'll be back as soon as I can, and if —'

'I ain' goin' stay here,' declared Harmon mutinously. 'I goin' with you-all, Mister Pud, and find that there boat.'

'So am I,' said Tim, not quite so heartily. 'Anyway, we can keep on rowing until we see something like a house or a light or — or something.'

Harmon took one of the oars from the not unwilling Pud, and, with Tim keeping an alert and anxious watch from the stern, they set forth down the branch stream. The mist was thinning now, and already there was a rift in the clouds from which a few white stars peeked down upon the adventurers. Pud's watch showed the time to be but a little after eight. He had judged the hour far later. With the lifting of the mist they were able to see for some distance, while the darker banks outlined their course for them plainly. The stream twisted often, as seemed the way of all streams in River Swamp, but no other waterways entered or left it, to their knowledge. At every turn Tim

whispered hoarsely for caution, and when they were past his sigh of relief sounded louder than his whisper. They had gone, to Pud's thinking, more than a mile when, over a hummock and between the bushes that clad it, a faint twinkle of light caught Tim's eyes. Obediently the rowers stopped and let the slow current carry the skiff silently onward toward a curve a few rods distant. Once around it Pud stealthily dug his blade in the water and the skiff nosed silently into the bank. The stream ran straight for a distance and, some three hundred feet away, the square bulk of a cabin loomed against the night sky. A pale gleam of lamplight fell through a window. Before the cabin, under the shadow of the bank, lay a grayish blur. Straining his eyes, Pud made out the uncertain shape of the launch.

CHAPTER XVI

NIGHT IN SWAMP HOLE

THEY listened intently. A faint breath of air was stirring and there was a whispering and rustling from the bushes above them, and for a space they heard nothing else. Then the sound of voices came, faintly, from the cabin. Pud placed the handle of his oar in Harmon's hand.

'I'm going to get out here,' he said. 'You take the boat back around the turn and keep hid. Stay there till I come. The launch will be headed upstream, and if I can get her going I'll slow down and get you fellows aboard. Anyway, you stay here until I get back.'

'Wha — what are you going to do?' asked Tim nervously.

'I'm going to swim down there and get aboard the launch. Then I'll let her float away farther downstream. When she's out of sound of the house I'll get her going and come back up here for you.'

'But you'll have to pass the cabin,' expostulated Tim, 'and they'll hear you coming and shoot at you! Why don't we let the skiff float on past and wait for you below somewhere? Or why not wait till they've gone to sleep?'

'They might not go to sleep,' replied Pud in whispers. 'It might be all right to go on past, but suppose some one came out and saw us? It would be all up then. They'd know we were after the launch and they'd watch it. Or they might get in and chase us and catch us.'

This last possibility silenced Tim effectually. He gave doubting approval to Pud's plan, and the latter, while Harmon worked the boat slowly toward the turn, disrobed to his underclothes, an operation extremely simple and brief. Finally, with a last whispered injunction to wait right there, no matter what happened, Pud slipped soundlessly into the water.

It was surprisingly chill for a moment, but he stifled a gasp and let the current bear him away. Now and then he worked a foot or a hand, for his progress seemed to him aggravatingly slow. The fact is that he was just a little bit frightened, and when one is frightened the moments have a way of lengthening dreadfully. The skiff disappeared from his sight and the white shape of the launch drew closer. The cabin was hidden from him by the bank, but, as he floated onward, the sound of voices reached him now and then. He kept to the darker water near the margin and, as a result, once became momentarily snarled in a submerged branch. Then the bow of the launch ap-

peared at arm's length and he let himself along the white side until he could reach up and grasp the gunwale amidship. There he paused and listened, his heart beating hard.

The voices from the cabin came to him louder, but still as no more than hoarse rumblings too faint to identify as those of Cocker and Lank. Slowly and with difficulty, since he sought to make no noise, Pud drew himself from the water and, with an anxious look at the cabin, some fifteen paces distant, squirmed into the launch and dropped, wet and panting, out of sight. Presently he wormed forward, past the bundle of folded cots and tent that still lay against the engine casing, and groped for the line that was holding the launch to a stake driven in the top of the bank. He regretted then that he had not thought to bring his knife. The stake was ten feet from where he lay stretched on the bow planking, while to cast off at the launch meant losing a good thirty feet of manila rope. He tried pulling the launch's nose closer to the stake, but he gained but a scant two feet before it grounded. There was nothing for it but to pull the rope through the brass-rimmed hole, work it loose at the cleat and go off without it. He raised his head and looked toward the cabin as his hands fumbled with the line, and as he looked a sud-

den glare of light shot toward him. The door had opened, voices were plainly distinguishable and, against the yellow light, framed in the doorway, were figures.

'Well, I'll get going,' said a voice that Pud recognized as that of the tall Lank. There was a yawn, interrupted by a second voice, one strange to the listener.

'You tella heem he not to go up da riv', said the voice. 'It is not safe, you tella heem.'

'Yeah, I'll look after that,' answered Lank. 'He knows he's got to work down-river this time. Well —'

Pud, for the moment frozen with fright, now did the first thing that entered his head. He squirmed down, lifted the canvas of the tent and, the frame of a cot digging into his ribs, huddled closely, silently beneath it. His heart was beating a dozen times to the second and he thought regretfully of the safety of the dark water flowing alongside. But it was too late now, for he could hear the steps of Lank close at hand. Then the launch tipped and the man's feet landed close to Pud's head. A faint light, probably, Pud thought, from his or Tim's electric torch, shone for an instant under the edge of the canvas. Then it disappeared and, behind him, Pud heard the wheel turned. Suddenly the engine started, shaking the boards

against which the boy was lying, and Lank's feet brushed the canvas as he passed to the bow. There was a whistled tune, broken by mutterings and the sound of feet scrambling from shore to boat, and the flap of a dropped rope. Then Lank went back to the engine and Pud felt the launch swinging as the current dragged it away from the bank. The propeller revolved, stopped, started again, the clutch grinding harshly in the silence. Then, the boat evidently headed downstream, the voyage began.

Lank, it seemed, was steering from the seat beside the engine, working the rudder with a hand on the wire rope where it passed him, a feat that Pud had once attempted with almost disastrous results. After a minute or two, though, he arose and came scuffling forward, and then it was that Pud's heart, which had already threatened to cease functioning several times that evening, just plain stopped business! For the edge of the canvas scarcely a foot from his frightened eyes was lifted!

He heard Lank grunt with the effort of bending, and he gave himself up for lost. But in the next instant something heavy and bulky was forced against his chest, prodded further with a kick of the man's foot, the canvas flap fell again and Pud's heart, with a painful thump, decided to beat again!

After a moment of revulsion that left him faint, Pud gathered sufficient courage to ease his hands forward and feel inquiringly of the object reposing under his chin. It was a bundle about a foot square tied with stout twine. Pud's curiosity ended, but not his concern. Presently, perhaps, Lank would come after the bundle, and if he did what was to prevent him from throwing back the canvas and exposing the doubled-up form of one Pud Pringle? Or he might in fumbling around in the darkness get hold of a bare foot; and Pud felt that in such an event Lank would be sufficiently curious to see what was attached to the foot! Pud stared venomously if unseeingly at the bundle. The only thing that occurred to him was to thrust it farther away until a portion of it showed beyond the canvas. So, perhaps, Lank would see it and not go fumbling around too much. Pud was glad to get it away from the immediate vicinity of his nose, for it had a strong and not too pleasant odor, an odor that aroused in Pud dim memories connected with unpleasant events. For want of a better occupation, and perhaps to keep his thoughts from apprehensive speculation as to the outcome of this adventure, Pud strove to connect that odor with the memories it evoked, and while the launch chugged steadily on down the stream, and

Lank whistled plaintively and not unmelodiously from near by, he frowningly bent his mind to its task. And suddenly — Eureka! — he had it!

Memory lifted a curtain and Pud saw himself, with Tim close by, in the job-print room at the back of the *Courant* office in Millville. It was extremely hot and the sun made golden squares on the old green shades that were pulled partly down at the open windows. Before him, and before Tim, was a pile of printed circulars, and between them were long white boxes into which they pushed envelopes containing the circulars that, with the aid of wooden rulers, they had first thrice folded. This was the price they had had to pay for the trip in the *Kismet*. The circulars, recently from the press, still smudged if you touched the print with your hand, and from them, nauseatingly strong in the hot room, came the odor of printer's ink! And it was printer's ink that Pud smelled now.

Again he felt of the package, lifted an end of it experimentally, and decided that here, too, were circulars, and, so deciding, lost further interest. Just so long as he didn't have to fold the pesky things and thrust them into obdurate envelopes they meant nothing in his life. Nothing, at least, unless, searching for them,

Lank found a fifteen-year-old boy, clad only in a cotton union-suit, instead!

Perhaps ten minutes had passed, perhaps twenty, when Pud realized that the launch was running more slowly. A light flickered past above the bank and faint sounds reached him; a dog barked far off, another answered from startlingly close; a rooster crowed in a tentative, half-hearted way; a man's voice shouted from nearby; the discordant strains of a concertina grew louder. More lights peeked under the edge of the canvas, the launch's engine stopped abruptly, the sound of laughter took its place amongst the medley of noise and there was a slight bump and a rasping sound as the launch sidled up to a landing. Pud's heart began to do double-time again, he pushed the bundle farther into the open and made himself smaller than ever.

Lank was stepping ashore with the bow line now, and now he jumped back again, close to Pud's place of concealment. Pud waited in an agony of suspense. The man didn't pass on, nor did he fumble along the edge of the canvas. Finally, or so Pud's straining ears told him, there was a sound that might have been 'Humph!' and the feet moved on past Pud's head. Then the launch tilted a bit, steps sounded on a plank and Pud knew that he was once more alone!

He lay still several long moments and then, pushing the bundle softly out of his way, he slowly thrust his head forth and peered about him. There was enough light from the stars and from the cabins that clustered closely along both sides of the stream to show him that, save for himself, the launch was empty. He scrambled out from under the dusty folds of the tent and looked cautiously over the edge of the boat. It was a strange scene that met his eyes.

The launch was fast to a small landing that jutted a few feet beyond the bank. Straight back from it stood a building from whose wide-open doorway streamed the yellow light of several lamps hanging from the ceiling of the room into which Pud stared. The place was evidently both a store and a residence, for through a second door the end of a bed was visible, while along one side of the front room ran a counter at which a half-dozen men were lounging. Behind it shelves held a small amount of groceries: Pud could see the colored labels on cans and boxes. Much loud talk and laughter came from the little store. It might be, Pud reflected, that more things than groceries passed across that counter. He thought he could distinguish the tall, broad-shouldered Lank among the customers, but he was not certain.

Pud had no doubt about this place being Swamp Hole, and seen as he was viewing it, with the board and slab cabins and little shanty-boats dotting the banks of the creek, the light of candle or lamp falling from doorway or window, with a tall and somber pine pointing up to the starlit sky here and there like a black sentinel, it seemed indeed to deserve its evil reputation. Farther down the stream a fire was burning redly in front of a cabin and dark forms passed about it, throwing huge and grotesque shadows athwart the glare. At short intervals along each bank small wharves jutted over the black water and punts and skiffs were numerous. Unseen to Pud, two men discussed the launch from the black shadows of the farther bank.

'Tain't nary boat I ever seen. Stranger in here, 'tis, Bud.'

'Right nice-lookin', too. Who you reckon run it in here? You see any one get off'n it?'

The concertina began a new tune and a woman's voice, shrill and wailing, joined it. Some one in a near-by cabin beat protestingly on a tin pan. A thin, bent-shouldered, bearded man came along the path that followed the bank, paused a few yards distant to inspect the launch, and then went on toward the store, straight along the lane of mellow light that

shone from doorway to wharf. 'Where'd that there power-boat come from?' he drawled as he reached the threshold. 'I seen a boat mighty like that yesterday up on —' The rest was lost to Pud.

The time for action had come. Already the stern of the launch was turning slowly out into the stream. Pud clambered up and loosed the line and scuttled back to the shadows of the boat. It seemed an age before the current stirred the launch, but at last it began to slip silently away from the tiny landing. Peering over the edge, Pud could see the top of the bank move slowly past him. The launch was floating almost broadside to the stream, but gradually it straightened out, its bow pointing down the creek. Too late, Pud reflected that he might almost as easily have taken to the water again and pushed the launch upstream until out of sight and then started the engine, in which case he would have got back to Tim and Harmon quickly enough. Now he would have to keep on down the creek, trusting to luck to find his way into Two-Pond Run.

But all that was for the future. Just now, crouching at the bow, listening with loudly beating heart for sounds that would announce that Lank had discovered his loss, Pud was concerned only with the present. Already the

sluggish current had borne him a good fifty yards and the sounds from the store came to him subdued by distance. Other sounds took their place; low voices from doorsills, snatches of wavering song, a man's voice raised in maudlin anger, the querulous wailing of a baby. He was nearing the outdoor fire now and the ruddy light was blotching the still water ahead. That the launch would pass unseen was too much to hope for, and he debated whether to remain concealed or to show himself at the bow. The question was settled for him.

'Hey, Pap, look yander! A big boat!' It was the shrill voice of a small boy.

'Power-boat, 'tis,' grunted the father. 'Where'd it come from, you reckon, Cal?'

'I d'know, Pap. Ain't ary soul in it, be there?'

'Don't look like. Must have slipped its line, eh?'

'Want I should fetch it?'

'Naw, what for? Let them as owns it come arter it.' The speaker chuckled maliciously. 'They'll be along soon enough, I reckon.'

The launch floated silently by and into the welcome darkness beyond the fire's radiance. The sound of oars ahead brought Pud's eyes above the bow. A small punt was creeping upstream, the man who was rowing unaware of

the other craft. Pud turned the wheel quickly to avoid a collision, and the faint squeak of the ropes brought the rower's head around sharply. A volley of oaths broke the silence as the two boats scraped past. Then from back up the creek came a loud shout.

'Hey! Some one grab that launch! Launch adrift down-creek!'

'Here she be! I'll fetch her!' The man in the punt, already a length astern, spun his small craft about and dug his oars. Pud stood up desperately.

'You keep away!' he called threateningly. 'This is my boat!'

'Hallo!' The man in the punt evinced surprise and for a moment stopped rowing. Then, 'Reckon you're stealin' her,' he grunted. 'Better come along back with her.' The punt bumped into the stern of the launch and, armed with an oar, the occupant began to scramble aboard.

'I'm not stealing her!' protested Pud. 'You keep off!'

He started back toward the stern. His foot found something that turned beneath it, almost upsetting him. Stooping, his hand closed on the boat-hook, no longer trailing astern but back in its former rôle of general nuisance. But it was no nuisance just now, for, holding it be-

fore him, Pud charged toward the enemy. The man, a squat form in the darkness, was steadying himself preparatory to jumping down from the stern planking. Perhaps if he had not been burdened with the oar he might have recovered his balance sooner, but as it was he was in no position to stand the thrust of Pud's weapon. There was a grunt, a loud splash, the rattle of the falling oar against the punt and, for an instant, silence. Then the man's head came up and, between puffings and gurgles, he pursued the vanishing launch with venomous oaths. A minute later Pud heard him scrambling over the side of the punt. A final raking fire of profanity followed, and then oars creaked against thole-pins again, the creaking diminishing momentarily, and Pud knew that he had won the action. Breathing hard, but exultant, he dropped the boat-hook and sprang to the engine. Up the stream the shouting continued, drawing nearer each second.

CHAPTER XVII

MAROONED!

TIM and Harmon watched Pud until the bend of the stream intervened and then, somewhat dejectedly, nosed the skiff to the bank and sat there in silence for a while. As usual, mosquitoes and gnats were numerous and bloodthirsty, but the boys had to an extent become inured to them and only when the pests invited slaughter by attacking their faces did they trouble to combat them. They sat sidewise, their feet on the seats they occupied to keep them out of the inch or two of water that covered the floor of the punt. The position was not extremely comfortable, and after a while Tim announced that he was going to get out onto the bank. Harmon followed, with Pud's clothing, and tied the painter to a bush. There was a small space bare of shrubbery from which, by leaning forward, they could see the light in the cabin. Tim had just drawn attention to this fact when they heard the sound of the launch's engine. They became tense as they listened. It stopped, began again. Then it became steady and its sound dwindled.

'He's got it,' exclaimed Tim, 'but he's going downstream!'

'How-come he do that?' inquired Harmon.

'Maybe she was headed down and he couldn't turn her. How's he going to get back here?'

'Reckon he goin' find him a wide place an' turn her roun' and shoot back quick!'

'Yes, and they'll shoot quick, too!' said Tim anxiously. 'Can you hear her now, Harmon?'

'Yes, she still a-hummin', but she long ways off.'

They waited. A half-hour passed, an hour. Then they forgot to keep track of time. The sky cleared magically and a million glittering white stars looked down on them. Tim gave up hope at last. 'They got *him*,' he concluded sadly. 'That's what happened. Maybe they killed him, Harmon!'

'They mighty mean-lookin' pair,' agreed the darky amiably.

'Well, my gracious goodness!' exclaimed Tim, outraged. 'You don't sound like you cared if they had!'

'Who ain' carin'? 'Course I is! Mister Pud's mighty fine boy. But, shucks, I don' reckon they really *kill* him. Maybe they pirate him.'

'Well, I'd like to know what we're going to do,' said Tim despondently. 'I'm hungry, and it's getting cold, and my feet are wet —'

'How-come we don' build us a fire?'

'Because they'd see us and come after us.'

'They ain' no light there now. I reckon they done gone to bed, Mister Tim. 'Sides, how they goin' get us? They's on 'at side of the creek and we's on this side, an' they ain' got no boat, is they?'

'N-no, maybe not, but they could swim across, couldn't they? Or they could shoot us!'

But after another ten minutes of shivering discomfort the fact that the cabin no longer showed a light convinced even the cautious Tim that a fire would be permissible.

'I goin' build it down in 'at there hollow yonder,' said Harmon, 'and no one ain' goin' see it nohow.'

Fuel was not easily come by, but after some search Harmon gathered enough to start with. Fortunately, in his position of cook he carried a box of matches in the pocket not sacred to his mouth-organ, and presently from the hollow between two hummocks, a not overly dry place, a cheerful ruddy light sprang. Tim approached it warily, mindful of snakes, of which they had seen many during the last two days. Harmon continued his quest for dry branches while Tim huddled close to the fire and, in its warmth, began to see life less darkly. Harmon joined

him finally and they talked of food. Harmon craved a couple of fat pork chops and lots of gravy. Tim's thoughts dwelt fondly on roast lamb and potatoes roasted whole with the meat. He became almost lyrical in his description of the golden-brown surfaces of those potatoes, and Harmon's eyes grew large and round as Tim pictured the juice trickling from under the carving knife as it sliced into the lamb!

But there wasn't much lasting pleasure to be derived from such vain imaginings and presently the conversation swung back to Pud and once more they exchanged theories. It might be, they agreed, that he had captured the boat and was going down until he could get back into Two-Pond Run and ascend that stream to where they were waiting. But Tim feared that such a journey would take Pud to Swamp Hole, and he had little faith in his chum being able to escape from that dread spot with his life — to say nothing of the launch!

'How-come they so bad in 'at there Swump Hole?' asked Harmon.

'I guess they've always been that way,' said Tim. 'The way I heard it, Harmon, is like this. When they were fighting the Civil War, a long time ago, there were some men around here who didn't want to fight. So they packed up and went back in River Swamp and hid out there

where no one could find them. When folks went after them, they'd hide in the bushes and shoot at 'em, or maybe they'd just get in their boats and sneak around these creeks until the folks that were hunting them got tired and went away again. Well, after a while the war got over and those men just settled down in Swamp Hole and had families and everything, and then, I guess, other folks heard about it and came, too. Anyway, my father says there's more than fifty families in Swamp Hole, and they don't send their kids to school or pay taxes or anything like that.'

'Huh,' said Harmon, 'mus' be mighty ign'nt folkses!'

'Course they are. Guess that's one reason they're so bad. They're poor, too, and maybe that's another reason.'

'Poor folkses ain' bad,' objected Harmon.

'N-no, but folks that are awfully poor and ignorant, *too*, sometimes are.'

Harmon didn't challenge that. Instead, he asked: 'How they live, Mister Tim?'

'I don't know. Some of them raise a few things; tobacco, for instance. And they do a lot of fishing.'

Conversation died for a space. Then Harmon asked, 'When you reckons we goin' get home again, Mister Tim?'

'Home!' said Tim bitterly. 'Gosh, it doesn't look as if we'd *ever* get home!'

'I's jus' 'bliged to be there Monday mornin', please, sir,' persisted Harmon anxiously. 'I's got me a 'gagement with Mister Tom Pawling to cut his lawn, and Mister Tom's pow'rful uppity if'n I ain' keep my 'gagements!'

'I wish I was at home right now,' said Tim longingly. 'My goodness gracious, there isn't any *sense* in this! Sitting out here in an old swamp without any supper or any bed! Gosh, I wish I was in my own bed this minute.'

'Ain' 'at the truth?' agreed the other sympathetically. 'Folkses is always wantin' be where they ain'. Some time when I's lyin' all wrop up warm in my own bed I's goin' say to myself, "Lawsey, 'at certainly was one fine ol' time me an' Mister Tim have 'at night we was in the swamp sittin' roun' li'l' ol' fire an' talkin'!" Yes, sir, I's certainly goin' say 'at very thing!'

'Humph,' grunted Tim with a perceptible lack of enthusiasm. 'It won't ever bother me any to be wrapped up warm in my own bed!' He shivered. 'And if I ever do get home again,' he added emphatically, 'I'll be satisfied to stay there! Next time Pud Pringle gets me to go on any old cruise with him — *What's that?*'

Tim broke off to start nervously at the sound

of a soft rustling in the bushes behind him. 'Didn't you hear it?' he demanded, looking around apprehensively. 'Suppose it was a snake?'

'No, sir, ain' no snakes traipsin' roun' this time o' night, Mister Tim. They all in bed an' asleep. Reckon it was a turkle. Lots of turkles in this ol' swamp.'

'You mean turtles. Anyway, I guess snakes do crawl around at night, because I've heard them.'

'You is?' Harmon's tone held doubt. Then: 'Mister Tim, was I ever tellin' you 'bout Sawyer Beeson an' the rattlesnake?'

'No. Who's Sawyer Beeson?'

'He's a colored man what use' to work with my pa in the chair fac'ry. He ain' livin' roun' here no more. Please, sir, let me tell you 'bout him an 'at rattlesnake.'

'Go ahead,' said Tim, yawning.

Harmon laid a couple of branches on the small fire and hunched himself forward, hugging his bare black knees. 'This here Sawyer Beeson was a mighty lazy, no-coun' nigger, Mister Tim. Times he'd work a li'l in the fac'ry an' times he wouldn' do no work at all. You knows Mister Sam Glendon 'at lives up at the Park? Well, one time this Sawyer Beeson was doin' some sort o' work for Mister Glendon up at his house and Mister Glendon he say to

Sawyer, "Sawyer, you fotch me a rattlesnake, an' I pays you five dollars." "My goodness, Mister Glendon," Sawyer say, "what you-all wantin' with a rattlesnake?" "I wants him for a specimens," Mister Glendon tell him. "You go catch one an' brung him to me 'live an' I hands you five dollars."

'Well, sir, Sawyer was needin' five dollars 'bout 'at time an' so he ponders awhile. And then he goes an' gets him a gunny sack and cuts him a forked stick and goes lookin' for Mister Rattlesnake. He clumb up on Coop's Hill where the water-tower's at, but he ain' fin' no snakes at all. Then he goes on back a piece over roun' 'at place where the ol' quarry used to be, an' after a while he sees him a rattlesnake. Mr. Rattlesnake ain' doin' nothin' at all but 'joyin' the weather outside his home, an' he kin' o' sleepy, maybe. So Sawyer Beeson he done crup up on ol' snake an' — bam! — he put 'at forked stick down over his neck! Mister Rattlesnake he twis' an' he turn an' he flip an' he flop, but 'twan't no use at all. Then Sawyer he spread out 'at there gunny-sack an' he say to Mister Rattlesnake, 'You go on in there 'fore I busts you' head for you!' Then he sort o' eases up on 'at forked stick an' Mister Rattlesnake he crawls right at 'at gunny-sack! First his head goes an'

then his middle an' then his tail an' then his rattles, an' when his button's done out o' sight Sawyer he grabs up the gunny-sack quick by a string what he's got aroun' the top of it and he pulls it shut mighty sudden!

'Twas a long ways back to town an' Sawyer he was mighty nigh dead by the time he gets to Mister Sam Glendon's. 'Cause, you see, Mister Tim, he has to hold 'at there gunny-sack clear away from him, like this, an' his arms gits powerful tired. He ain' wantin' 'at snake to bite him through the sides of 'at bag. No, sir! Lots o' times he wants to lay ol' gunny-sack down, but he's afraid he ain't got it tied right tight an' he's scared to do it. So he keep on a-walkin', changin' arms mighty frequent, an' after a while he 'rives at Mister Glendon's. "I done fotch 'at snake you asks me for," he say. "Does I get me 'at five dollars?" "You certainly does," Mister Glendon say. "Is he a big snake, Sawyer?" "Well, to tell the truth, Mister Sam," Sawyer tell him, "he ain' so powerful prodigious, sir, but he's the weightenes' snake I ever carries, sir!" So Mister Glendon he gets him a cage and opens it and Sawyer he cuts the string of 'at there gunny-sack an' he drops it in the cage an' they waits for Mister Rattlesnake to come out an' say "Howdy." But he ain' show hissself, an'

after a-while Mister Glendon get him a stick an' poke ol' bag around. But still Mister Rattlesnake ain' come out. So Mister Glendon he lifts 'at bag up and shakes it an' there ain' no snake there at all! No, sir, 'at ol' Mister Rattlesnake he jus' crawl *under* 'at gunny-sack 'stead of *into* it, an' all time Sawyer was pullin' it tight Mister Rattlesnake was a-lyin' right there laughin' at him! Yes, sir, jus' a-bustin' his sides, I reckon! Mister Glendon he done give Sawyer two-bits 'stead o' five dollars, 'cause, he say, the way Sawyer look when he see they ain' no rattlesnake, an' he 'members how he nigh wore hisself out carryin' 'at gunny-sack home, was wuth it!

Tim, whose eyes had closed more than once during the leisurely narrative, chuckled sleepily. 'It's a good story, Harmon,' he murmured. 'Guess I'll just lie down awhile and —'

He didn't finish the remark. He didn't need to. He was already asleep. Harmon placed another branch on the flames, looked appraisingly at the slender stock of fuel remaining and shook his head. After a moment his hand stole into his pocket and emerged with his mouth-organ. He viewed it longingly and then glanced at the slumbering Tim. After a period of hesitation he shook his head again, replaced the faithful instrument in his pocket and curled himself up by the fire.

CHAPTER XVIII

COUNTERFEIT MONEY

PUD searched hurriedly, frantically in the gloom for the handle that fitted into the fly-wheel while the sounds of pursuit grew louder and nearer. He found it at last, slipped it in place, and heaved mightily. There was no response from the engine. Then he remembered that he had not switched the spark on. The omission remedied, he turned the wheel again, and this time the response was instantaneous. The engine raced loudly. He peered forward, saw that the launch's head still pointed into the stream and pulled the clutch lever back. Then he hurried again to the bow and seized the wheel.

Now he dared an anxious look to the rear. Lights moved along the bank and there was a confusion of hails and shouts, but for the moment he was not threatened with capture. With the throttle wide open and the current aiding, the launch slipped down the winding stream at a good five miles an hour. Pud believed that there were motor-boats of a sort back there, but he doubted that any of them could show much speed. Besides, it would take

minutes to get one started, and already he had a fair lead. Cabins still showed their lights along the way, but they stood farther apart now. A smaller stream led off to the left, but Pud paid it no heed. Then came a longish turn in the creek, and presently, looking back, but one solitary light met his view. Perhaps the sounds of pursuit still kept up, but the engine was chugging loudly and he could no longer hear them. He heaved a deep sigh and sank onto the seat beside the wheel.

It was not difficult to follow the creek, for, once away from the lights of Swamp Hole, it lay before him quite plainly in the starlight, a broadening path bordered by the black gloom of its banks. The stars were reflected brightly in its still depths as it led him on and away from the Hole. As the minutes passed and no sign of pursuit showed, his courage grew. Sitting there in the bow he began to talk to himself aloud.

‘I told them they couldn’t get away with it,’ he muttered. ‘I guess they know it now! No one can steal my good old boat, I guess; not to keep it! No, sir, not for very long they can’t! I guess Lank’s pretty mad about now. I guess he’s wondering what happened.’ Pud chuckled. ‘I’d just like to know what he *does* think! Bet you he never will suspect I did it!’

He sort of wished he might somehow have revealed himself to Lank before he got free. It would have been decidedly satisfying to have called back a defiance. Pud pictured himself standing in the stern, shaking his fist at the amazed Lank and shouting, 'Ha, villain, what think you now? Pud Pringle has come into his own once more!' Well, anyway, something like that.

Pud couldn't see just how he could have done that, though. He guessed it was better to get the boat back than to have risked failure seeking credit for the exploit. Besides, maybe Lank and Cocker — and the other man who had talked so funny — would feel more worried and humiliated if they weren't able to account for the boat's disappearance. Maybe they'd think it was spooks! On the whole, Pud was pretty well satisfied. He did wish, though, that he knew whether the men had stolen the contents of the lockers. There was no time to satisfy himself on that point now, but, since they had not taken the tent and the beds and the cooking-kit, he didn't think it likely they had disturbed the things that were out of sight.

The launch did what Pud believed to be a mile without misadventure. She did strike a snag once, but she broke through it without damage to the propeller. Where the creek was

leading him he didn't know, save that it must eventually bring him either into Two-Pond Run or Turtle Creek. Since leaving the Hole he had, he reckoned, been going in a generally southwesterly direction, and it seemed that Two-Pond Creek must be somewhere ahead. Once on that stream, he meant to double back and rescue Tim and Harmon. He recalled their plight with mingled sympathy and amusement. Tim, he decided, would be complaining like anything about now!

More than once he caught sight of small streams leading away from the one he traversed, but he had no use for them, and it was not until what seemed another mile had been left behind that he was called on to choose between divergent courses. Turning somewhat abruptly to the left, he saw, as the boat swung, a sizable stream leading away to the right. He stumbled back and threw out the clutch, but by the time the launch had slowed down the other opening was far back. Perhaps it would lead to Two-Pond Run, he reflected, but it looked in the darkness rather as if it went back toward Swamp Hole. Besides, it was much narrower than the stream he was on, and it might peter out and lead him nowhere. Half an hour later he was glad he had not taken it, for then he came to a creek fully as large as the one it entered, one that started

off in just the right direction. It wasn't until he had gone some distance along it that he discovered that the current was flowing against him!

Dismay vanished, though, when he recalled the erratic behavior of River Swamp waterways. Even if he was going upstream he might reach Two-Pond Run. Anyway, he would keep on. He was tired now, and pretty sleepy, too, and the rescue of his marooned companions seemed far less urgent than it had earlier. Nothing could happen to them, anyhow. Of course they wouldn't find it very pleasant, spending the night up there in the hummocks, and they'd be kind of hungry — Pud paused. Gee, he was hungry himself, now that he came to think of it! Still, he wasn't nearly so hungry as he was sleepy. He yawned widely.

The dark water, star-sprinkled, continued interminably between its banks, the latter now patched with groups of trees that threw pockets of blackness over the stream. Pud's eyes closed for moments at a time, but always he managed to force them open in time to avoid running aground. He blinked longingly at the pile of canvas behind him. If he could only snuggle up under there in warmth and darkness and go to sleep! Warmth was becoming almost as desirable as slumber, for, while his wet under-

clothes had long since dried, the night was growing chill with the damp coolness of the swamp and he was beginning to shiver. There were things he might put on, but he would have to stop the boat to search for them in the lockers, and rather than pause he huddled lower under the gunwale and stared painfully ahead in the hope of seeing Two-Pond Run appear.

Presently he sighed with relief, for the stream widened suddenly and then was lost in a larger body of water. But his succeeding sigh was one of disappointment. It was not the Run he had found, but a pond somewhat larger than Turtle Pond. He must have spent a quarter of an hour chugging about it and straining weary eyes along the shadowed margin for sign of a way out. Twice he poked the launch's nose into the mud when what had looked like the mouth of a stream proved only a shallow. But finally perseverance won and he was going on once more along a black, tree-bordered creek that seemed to run almost at right angles to the one he had left. More time passed. His head nodded frequently, but it wasn't safe to close his eyes now even for an instant, for this stream was far darker and turned continually to right and left.

Then he found himself in another pond, a pond that was twice as large as the one he had

recently found his way out of, and he threw out the clutch and stared discouragedly about him. This settled it, he told himself. Had he reached the Run, he would have somehow pegged on, but to spend another age nosing around the sides of a pond was beyond him. He was sorry for Tim and Harmon, but they'd just have to make out as best they could. As for him, he was going to sleep!

He dragged the anchor from the bow locker and dropped it over, shortened the line and made it fast, his hands all thumbs, and then made his bed. The boat-hook, rescued by Lank or Cocker from the water, again served him well. He rested an end on each gunwale, draped the folds of the canvas over it in the shape of a tent and crawled beneath. But the canvas was unsympathetic against his chilled body and he stumbled out and searched the nearer lockers. Luck was with him, for he found Tim's gray flannel shirt and a pair of trousers; whose, Pud neither knew nor cared. Clothed in these garments, he again sought the seclusion of his improvised tent. This time, in lowering himself to the floor, he came in contact with an uncomfortable object that proved to be Lank's package. He thrust it out of the way, gathered the folds of the canvas under his head as a pillow and, with a long and delicious sigh, gave

himself to slumber. He was just floating blissfully off when a disturbing thought came to him. He hadn't written to his folks that day! Worse, the letter he had written yesterday still lay in his jacket pocket, unposted! These reflections, though, couldn't keep him awake long, and soon he was fast asleep.

Had he known that the one letter posted by him had, by one of those mistakes such as even an efficient Post-Office Department sometimes makes, been dispatched to Millersville instead of Millville, and that it was not to arrive at the little house on Arundel Street until the next morning, he might have been kept awake two minutes longer, but certainly no more than that!

He awoke to an amber glow that offended his eyes. For a moment he wondered dazedly where he was. Then he turned his head and snuggled back, his whereabouts a matter of no interest. But it was more than the sunlight striking through the faded brown canvas that had disturbed him, and he was destined to sleep no longer. There were sounds about him, and then his tent was invaded and a lean countenance with a grizzled mustache and two keen brown eyes was bending over him. About the same instant the boat-hook fell on one of Pud's ankles and he became very wide awake, though sorely puzzled.

'Hello!' said the lips under the grizzled mustache.

'Hello,' replied Pud vaguely. 'What time —' But that inquiry didn't seem just the right one, and he changed it to: 'What do you want?'

'Well, we might be wanting you,' answered the man. Two other faces appeared, a long, tanned face, clean-shaven, and a somewhat round face that held a wide smile. Pud thought that they must find it rather uncomfortable to be standing in the water like that, but when he had attained a sitting position he found that they were leaning over the side of a trim launch lying alongside. That was both surprising and interesting, and Pud climbed to his feet to have a better look.

'What's your name, youngster?' pursued the man who had spoken before.

Resentful of the term 'youngster,' Pud was taking his own time about replying when he discovered two things almost simultaneously, to wit; that the round-faced man wore the uniform of the police, and that, as the speaker leaned forward, a nickel badge, pinned close to the arm-hole of his vest, was exposed to view. Pud decided to forgive the term.

'Anson Pringle,' he replied respectfully.

'What!' The man leaned back and cast a glance toward the bow of Pud's launch. 'What

are you doing in this boat, then? Where's the one you started out in? And what have you done with the other boys?'

'I changed the name,' explained Pud. 'They — they're up there a ways.'

'No wonder we couldn't get trace of the *Kismet*,' chuckled the policeman. 'Say, kid, why didn't you write to your folks like they told you to? Didn't you know they'd be anxious?'

'I did write once,' answered Pud. 'Tuesday.'

'Well, they never got it,' said the first man, who it later appeared, was a sheriff. 'They're pretty worried about you, Anson. So are the other boys' folks. Your father telephoned to me last night about ten o'clock and we started out early this morning to look for you. No one had seen a launch called *Kismet*, but we found an old chap at Corbin who remembered a boat with two white boys and a negro in it. He had the name wrong, though. What did he say it was called, Tom?'

'*Vengeance*, I think.'

'This is it,' said Pud. 'It's the *Vengeance* on one side and the *Jolly Rodger* on the other.'

'For the love of Mike! What's the idea?'

'I couldn't just decide which I liked best,' said Pud.

There was a chuckle from the third occupant

of the police launch. He was looking to where the skull-and-cross-bones flag, dropped by Cocker, lay outspread near the stern. 'Playing pirate, I guess, eh?' he inquired.

'Sort of,' muttered Pud.

'Playing the dickens, you mean,' observed the policeman severely. 'Worrying your folks 'most to death!'

'But I did write, I tell you! I wrote twice, only the last letter didn't get posted because we lost our way and got up into Cypress Lake —'

'You did! Well, I'll be switched!' The sheriff shook his head amazedly. 'And found your way out again, eh?'

'Well, two men came along and showed us the way, and then they stole the launch and I went and got it back and I was trying to find Tim and Harmon, but I got so sleepy I couldn't go on, and so I stayed here, and —'

'Stole your launch, did they? Who were they? How'd you get it back?'

'Hold on,' said the policeman. 'We'd better take him in with us and go fetch those other kids. He can tell us about that on the way. Where'd you say you left them?'

'About a couple of miles this side of the lake; where you turn off the Run to go into Swamp Hole. You see, Lank and Cocker live along that stream a ways, and —'

'Those the men who stole your boat?'

'Yes, sir.'

The policeman eyed the sheriff. 'Who might they be, Henry?'

'Don't know. Sure the name wasn't Hank? There's three-four Hanks up there.'

'No, sir, it was Lank. I don't believe they belong in the Swamp regular. Lank said they were just visiting. He said they'd been fishing when we met them, but they didn't have any lines or poles in the skiff.'

'What sort of looking men were they?' asked the third occupant of the police launch. He appeared to take interest in the conversation for the first time. Pud described Lank and Cocker as well as he could.

'Cross-eyes, you say? And a long, crooked nose? And might be all of six feet tall?'

'Yes, sir, I think so.'

'Know him, Kinsey?' asked the sheriff.

'I wouldn't be surprised. Sounds a lot like Jim Thorbourn. Thorbourn served a term at Joliet about four years back. Hasn't been heard of since that I know of.'

'Counterfeiting?' inquired the policeman.

'Passing.'

'Well, he doesn't answer the description of any of the lot we've heard of,' said the policeman.

'He might have passed the stuff out to them. Son, did you see the place they live in?'

'Not very well. It was sort of dark then. It was just a board cabin.' Pud was trying to piece things together in his mind. The word 'counterfeiting' seemed to suggest something to him, but he couldn't think what!

'Can you take us to it?' asked Mr. Kinsey.

'I'm not sure,' said Pud. 'If I could find Tim and —' He stopped suddenly, staring wide-eyed at the other.

'What's wrong?' demanded the man.

Pud found his tongue. 'Lank took a package with him,' he said slowly. 'It —'

'What sort of a package?' Mr. Kinsey asked eagerly.

'Square. It smelled of ink. I thought it was circulars.'

'Where'd he take it?'

'To Swamp Hole.'

'You been in there, too!' cried the sheriff.

'Well, well, what did he do with it?' pursued Mr. Kinsey impatiently.

'Nothing,' said Pud. 'He left it. It's here.'

'Here! Where? Find it, you young idiot!'

At another time Pud might have resented the title, but now he didn't notice it. He was searching hurriedly under the confusion of his wrecked tent. Then he found the package, and

Mr. Kinsey, who had jumped down beside him, snatched it out of his hands. He didn't hurry to open it, though. Instead, he turned it over and over and studied it thoroughly. To Pud, wildly impatient, he seemed to be the slowest person he had ever met! Finally, though, Mr. Kinsey took a penknife from a pocket and severed the stout cord. The sheriff and the policeman leaned curiously forward as the coarse brown paper was removed. Then, as the contents were exposed, the sheriff whistled softly, eloquently. Pud's eyes grew bigger and bigger.

There, in two neatly stacked piles, was more money than he had ever dreamed of!

CHAPTER XIX

THE DESERTED CABIN

'PHONEY?' asked the sheriff.

Mr. Kinsey lifted some of the bills from one of the two stacks and riffled the edges with a square thumb, nodding. These were tens; the other pile held twenties. He passed one of the oblong slips of crisp paper to the sheriff. 'Rot-ten job,' he said contemptuously. 'Wouldn't fool a child. Look at the lathe work! And the threads, done with a fine pen; no silk there. These are some of the same lot, Sheriff, as the ones the banks picked up. I'd like mighty well to know who made the plates. He must be a fool to think he could get away with anything as crude as that!'

'Well, now, I don't know,' said the sheriff slowly. 'I reckon if some one was to hand me one of those I wouldn't suspect anything wrong with it. 'Course, if I was on the lookout for queer money I might be leery.' He handed the bill to the policeman.

'I'd take it in a minute,' said the latter, 'if I didn't know there was bad ones around.'

Mr. Kinsey smiled and shook his head. 'It

will pay you to get a genuine bill and study it,' he said. 'It's a good thing to know what a real ten-dollar bank-note looks like, Casey. Then maybe you won't ever get stung.' He placed the bill back and retied the package. 'Want to run up there, Sheriff, and look things over?' he asked as he climbed back into the other boat.

'Well, I dunno,' was the reply. 'Think there's enough of us?'

'Oh, there won't be any trouble,' answered Mr. Kinsey. 'They've skipped by this time. I'd just like to look the place over. Might find something that would help me a bit.'

'Well, if they've gone,' objected the sheriff, 'we'd better go back to town, maybe, and work the 'phone.'

'No hurry. I'd rather find out who they are first. I'm pretty sure about Thorbourn, but this "Cocker" has me guessing. And there may have been others in the gang.'

'There was one more,' said Pud, and he told about the man who 'talked funny.'

'Italian, probably,' commented Mr. Kinsey. 'He was the engraver, I guess. Well, let's go.'

'You come in here,' directed the sheriff, 'and we'll pick up your friends. Your boat will be all right, I reckon, till we get back.'

Pud obeyed, and the police launch, with Mr. Casey in charge, jumped forward. That was,

as Pud told himself, 'some launch.' It was long and slender, with a sharp, high bow, and it gleamed with white paint and mahogany and shining brass. The engine was housed in a compartment to itself, well forward, and beyond that, perched on the bow deck, was something concealed in a waterproof canvas cover that engaged Pud's curiosity tremendously until he finally realized, with a thrill, that it was a small machine-gun.

To his surprise, the police launch, which bore no name, but had the letters 'L. P. D.' painted on the bow, turned almost instantly into a broad creek which the sheriff told him was Two-Pond Run.

'That's Second Pond there, son; where you spent the night. First Pond's two miles below.'

'Gee,' muttered Pud, 'if I'd known that last night —'

'Glad you didn't,' said Mr. Kinsey. 'We might not have found you at all. Suppose you tell us about your run-in with those fellows, Lank and Cocker. I'd like to get it straight.'

So Pud began with their arrival at Corbin, with Gladys Ermintrude aboard, and narrated their adventures down to the evening before when sleep had overtaken him. He had three interested and, at moments, slightly incredulous hearers.

‘Son,’ said the sheriff solemnly, ‘you’ve got a heap o’ pluck, and I’ll be gol-swizzled if you haven’t got a head on your shoulders, too!’

‘He’s got something else that’s better than those,’ said Mr. Kinsey, ‘and that’s luck!’

‘Aren’t you hungry?’ asked the sheriff solicitously.

‘Starved,’ laughed Pud.

‘‘Course you be! Tom, got anything to eat aboard?’

The policeman shook his head regretfully. ‘Afraid not,’ he said. ‘I don’t know, though, Henry. Look in the little locker just back of you. There might be some crackers.’

There were! Only part of a carton, but Pud, eating them ravenously, was sure they had saved his life! There was plenty of cool water in a copper tank with a little nickel faucet, and he made a breakfast. While he ate, he listened to the conversation of the others. He learned that the sheriff’s name was Bowker, that Mr. Kinsey was a detective of the Department of Justice who had been sent to Livermore to find the persons who had been flooding the country thereabouts with counterfeit money, and that the latter’s presence aboard the launch was purely an accident. He had, it appeared, been at Police Headquarters when Sheriff Bowker had arrived to requisition the launch and had

added himself to the party. Pud learned, too, many interesting facts about counterfeiters and their methods. The thought that the somewhat friendly Lank was in reality a desperate criminal, one 'wanted' by the Federal Government, stirred him considerably. Why, he and Lank had talked together just like ordinary folks! And, more marvelous still, he, Pud Pringle, alone and unaided, had foiled the villain! *Gee!*

'Getting nigh Cypress Creek, son,' announced the sheriff, breaking in on Pud's reflections. 'Maybe you better watch for those partners of yours.'

A minute or so later the launch slowed down, swung gracefully to the right and nosed into the smaller stream. Pud recognized the scene, although the morning sunlight gave it a far different aspect. Policeman Casey's voice came suddenly from the bow.

'There they are,' he said. 'One white and one black. On the bank over there.'

It was rather a sorry pair who sat on the rim of the creek and kept watch over a dilapidated rowboat. There had been no fire this morning, and, as a matter of course, no breakfast, and only within the last half-hour had the sun's warmth begun to drive the chill from their bodies. But at sight of the launch they perked up immediately, their delight tempered by

dubious surprise at the discovery that the boat was not only a strange one, but one inhabited by strange men. The discovery of Pud brought relief, but at the next instant Tim saw the uniformed officer and feared that his chum was in the hands of the Law. Indeed, it took a good while for Pud to convince Tim that he wasn't, and he hadn't quite succeeded when, with the outcasts aboard and the skiff tied astern, the police launch came in sight of the cabin.

'You boys better stay here and keep out of sight,' said the sheriff, jerking his pistol holster around to the front.

'Oh, they've gone,' said Mr. Kinsey confidently. 'Door's wide open, you see. Let the kids come if they want to.'

So they all went, the three men well in advance, and Tim, ever cautious, bringing up the rear. But no hostile demonstrations greeted the party as, leaving the launch well upstream, they advanced through a thicket and at last came to the edge of the small clearing. The cabin was a ramshackle affair of weathered planks and pine slabs, with a roof patched here and there with pieces of tin or squares of tar paper. There was a sagging porch in front, a door and two windows. A third window looked up the stream and a crazy brick-and-clay chimney peered over the roof at them.

Mr. Kinsey gave a hail, but there was neither answer nor sign of life, and they went on, crossed the rotting boards of the porch and entered the cabin. It had probably never been commodiously furnished, and perhaps what was left behind was all there ever had been; two bedsteads built against the walls, a rickety table, the remains of a canvas camp-chair, and four home-made stools. The cabin was divided by a wooden partition into two rooms of unequal size, the smaller of which had evidently served as kitchen and dining-room and the larger as sleeping- and living-apartment. There was a two-year-old calendar tacked to a wall and a litter of empty food containers, crusts of bread, fragments of paper, and other rubbish lay about.

‘Flown,’ said Mr. Kinsey dryly.

He peered about on the soiled floor, kicked about among the rubbish, fumbled amongst the ashes of the fireplace. Finally he brushed his hands. ‘They didn’t leave much,’ he said admiringly. ‘Plenty of ink on the floor over there, and a strong smell of it still, but that’s about all. Here’s where the press stood, Sheriff.’ He pointed with a broad-toed shoe at four spots on the worn floor. ‘Those are acid stains yonder, by that window. They moved out last night, I guess. You can see one or two

places where the press scraped between here and the door. Must have had plenty of time, or thought they had, for they cleaned up pretty thoroughly. Took even the lamps, didn't they? Must have had a boat-load! Wonder where they got that boat?' He looked speculatively at the sheriff.

'That's so,' said the latter. 'You didn't see any boat besides your own here last night, did you?' he asked of Pud.

'No, sir, I'm pretty sure there wasn't any.'

'Humph! Well, this Lank fellow probably fetched himself back in one from the Hole. Don't seem like they could have got far, rowing, does it?'

'Oh, I don't believe they rowed,' said the Secret Service man. 'There are motor-boats about here, aren't they?'

'Yes, but they aren't much. Still, they might have hired one — or stolen it, for that matter — at the Hole. We might find out if a boat's missing. They wouldn't tell us, though, like as not. They're pretty close-mouthed in there.'

'No harm asking, I guess.' Mr. Kinsey gave a last look about and moved toward the door that gave from the kitchen to the back of the cabin. It was closed, but unlocked, and they all followed him out. There wasn't much there; a few yellowed bits of paper that told nothing,

a scanty woodpile, some old tin cans, a broken-handled shovel, the battered remains of a straw hat. Mr. Kinsey made the circuit of the cabin, passed through it again and went down the short path to the creek. There were plenty of footprints, but he did not, as Pud thought he should have, produce a magnifying-glass and tape-measure and study them in the manner of the detectives of whom Pud had read. Instead he gave them brief and unimpressed attention and went on to the bank where the *Kismet* had been tied up the night before. Here there were signs of recent activity. The bank was torn and trodden by many steps, and a gash in the edge showed where something heavy had been dragged across. The Secret Service man peered long into the water, shading his eyes, stepping this way and that.

‘Thought I saw something down there,’ he said at last carelessly, ‘but it’s only a snag. Well, that’s all we can do here, Sheriff. We’ve got to get our news somewhere else.’

‘Didn’t learn a thing, eh?’ asked Sheriff Bowker as they turned back toward the launch.

‘Not much. I learned that they’d been printing here, and I’m pretty well satisfied that the plates were either engraved in that shack or finished there. Those were acid stains all right. I know what kind of a press they used and I

know that the third man, the one the boy said talked funny, is a short, rather small guy; probably not over five feet six, and' — he took something from his pocket and showed it to the sheriff — 'I know this is the brand of cigarettes he smokes. Found it in the ashes in the chimney-place. That doesn't help much, of course, but I've started on less. Besides, I know one of the three already, and that's enough to land them all — some day.'

The sheriff nodded. 'I know,' he said. 'You fellows generally get 'em in the end. But, say, how'd you get at the Italian's size and his height, eh?'

'Well, the boy described the other two pretty well. One tall and big-built, the other shorter, but still average height, and heavy-set. Guess maybe you didn't notice those beds, did you? Boxes, sort of, filled with marsh hay. One of them was used by Lank and the fellow called Cocker. You could see that easy enough. The other was used by this Italian guy and there was six or eight inches of the hay at the bottom that had never been pressed down. That's how I figured his height. I got his size from the size of his foot. His prints were all over outside there. Wears about a six shoe, and has a high arch.'

The sheriff grunted. 'Well, that's clever,'

he allowed, 'but I wouldn't want to see a man convicted on that sort of evidence.'

'Oh, that isn't evidence. That's only information that may or may not come in handy some day. Well, now let's try this famous Swamp Hole I've been hearing so much about!'

Pud had a long story to tell and many explanations to make while the police launch, her powerful motor scarcely more than purring, went on down the winding stream. But he was favored with as rapt an audience as any narrator could desire, and when he told of the short and sharp engagement in which, with the trusty boat-hook, he had repelled boarders, Tim gasped admiringly.

'Gosh!' he said.

'My golly!' chuckled Harmon. 'Reckon you's a pretty fine ol' pirate, Mister Pud, after all!'

After that Pud brought events down to the moment, exhibiting with Mr. Kinsey's permission, the amazing contents of Lank's package, at sight of which Harmon's eyes stuck so far out of his round black countenance that Pud was momentarily uneasy lest they might not get back again! And Tim was still questioning when the launch glided around a bend and Swamp Hole lay before them.

Pud blinked. What he saw now was no more

like what he had seen last night than — well, than daylight is like dark! Now the warm sunlight bathed the scene; the tranquil stream reflected the clear blue sky, the green banks, the little cabins and shanty-boats, the clearings about them, the garden-patches and tobacco-fields beyond. Tall, straight pines and spreading oaks threw patches of shadow over which the morning dew still lay like a silver mist. The cabins, roughly made though they were, looked neat and homelike, and from most of them the gray-blue smoke of morning fires still arose to hover over the little village with a pleasantly pungent odor. Nearly every habitation had its small truck-patch behind. In some cases the patches were of good size, and several held strawberry beds in blossom and fruit. Tobacco, already a foot high, stretched back over land reclaimed from the swamp, its broad green leaves bright in the sun. Among the plants the growers were at work, men, women, and children.

In front of a cabin two women were fashioning baskets of willow withes. Before another an elderly, white-bearded man was making a hickory chair. In front of the small store, in the morning sunshine, a handful of Swampers, sighting the approach of the strange launch, ceased their gossip and lounged unhurriedly

down the path. Somehow, Pud felt a dim sense of disappointment. This was not the Swamp Hole of his imaginings. This was merely a pleasant, peaceful, and peaceable little village which no more suggested dark deeds and villainy than Millville itself!

Harmon, who, in spite of a brave front, had been secretly alarmed at the prospect of beard-ing the desperadoes of Swamp Hole, regained his poise and put his head a little higher over the edge of the boat. Protected by the presence of a policeman in uniform, a sheriff, and a detective, he could, he believed, show himself with impunity. Tim was at once relieved and, like Pud, disappointed. He guessed Pud hadn't done anything so startlingly daring after all!

The police boat eased to the few posts and old planks that served as a pier, and the sheriff hailed one of the loungers cheerily. 'Howdy, Jeff! How you-all?'

'Fair to middlin', Sheriff.' The man addressed was tall, lanky, very blue of eye, and with tow-colored hair. He wore cotton trousers and the remains of a blue calico shirt. Head and feet were bare. He smoked a pipe as he ambled nearer, followed by his companions, and slowly let his gaze travel from one end of the launch to the other.

'Say, Jeff,' went on the sheriff, 'we picked up

this skiff down yonder on the Run. Least, these boys did. Thought it might belong to some o' you folks in here. Happen to know it?'

Jeff viewed the skiff leisurely, walking back along the path to obtain all particulars of its appearance. The others viewed it likewise, in silence. Finally, 'Well, now I dunno as I do, Sheriff,' said Jeff. He spoke guardedly and turned inquiringly to a neighbor. 'You ever see it afore, Joe?'

Joe shook a large, shaggy black head, darting a speculative glance at the sheriff. Other heads shook, too.

'Well, might's well take it along then,' announced the sheriff. 'Reckon these boys can find a use for it. Thought maybe, though, it belonged in here. Saw one of your power-boats down below when we came up. Reckon it was yours, Tolliver, wasn't it?'

A squat, bent-backed man at the back of the gathering looked startled, but shook his head with some vigor. ''Twan't mine, Sheriff. I ain't got me no power-boat now.'

'That so? Well, whose you reckon it was, Jake? I'm plumb sure it was a Swamp Hole boat.'

The countenances of the group regarded him blankly. Jake Tolliver shook his head again. 'Reckon 'twan't none of ourn, Sheriff. Ain't

but three-four here, an' they was all in creek this mornin'.'

'Well, 'tain't important. We'll run along. These young fellows got lost and their folks sent me to bring 'em back. All right, Casey.'

'Sheriff,' drawled Jeff, 'I ain't sure but that there's Tally Moore's skiff, now I get me another look at it. It sort o' favors Tally's. Hank, you take a good look, will you? You recollect that old skiff o' Tally's, don't you?'

'Reckon that's Tally's,' answered the man addressed promptly and with no more than a glance at the rowboat. 'Heard him tell awhile back as how he'd lost it.'

'Tally Moore?' said the sheriff. 'Don't believe I recall him, Jeff. Where's his place?'

'Round on backwater yonder. Second house on farther bank. Reckon that's his boat, Sheriff. Reckon he'll be powerful obliged to you.'

The sheriff nodded, waved good-bye. The launch slipped forward again. The group about the landing watched it silently, and along the creek old folks and children in front of the cabins or shanty-boats drawn back on the banks stopped at their tasks or play to look as silently.

The sheriff chuckled. 'I said it wasn't any use. They hate to answer questions. Wouldn't

even say about the skiff till they was mighty sure we wasn't in here to make trouble.'

'Looked peaceable enough,' commented Mr. Kinsey.

'Yes, they're peaceable enough so long's you don't rile 'em,' agreed the other tolerantly. 'Don't like strangers much; 'specially when they happen to be collectin' taxes. They've got a mean way of shootin' from cover, too. Mighty difficult to tell where they're located. Ain't much taxes goes out o' the Hole! It ain't a right healthy job, sir, collectin' in here. Some o' these fellows ought to be in jail, but, by and large, they're fairly law-abiding.'

The backwater proved to be the stream that Pud had glimpsed last night, turning off to the left just past the last cabin on the creek-bank. It was shallow and muddy and came to an end not far distant where a cedar thicket massed itself closely and darkly. There were three cabins along it, one on the left side and two on the right. Good-sized patches of tobacco or corn flanked them and spread back for some way. Getting to the last landing, a log raft tied to stakes in the muddy bank, was skittish work for the launch, but she finally came within hailing distance of the small cabin and a shout from the sheriff brought a thin, stooped, pale-faced man around a corner of it.

CHAPTER XX

TALLY MOORE TALKS

'RECKON you're Tally Moore,' said the sheriff amiably.

The man, pausing on the top of the low bank, looked them over suspiciously. Finally his gaze fell on the skiff, bumping astern, and his faded eyes lighted a little. He nodded, as though agreeing to something he was more than doubtful of.

'Well, I'm sheriff up to Livermore. These boys came across this skiff yesterday and Jeff Gosling said he thought it belonged to you. If so, here 'tis. 'Course,' added the sheriff, laughing jokingly, 'you'll have to prove your title to it!'

'It's mine,' said Tally in a hoarse voice that sounded much too large for his thin body. 'Lost it two-three days ago.'

'Lost it, did you? That's funny now. The men that had it said they'd hired it from you. Maybe it isn't the one, after all.'

Tally Moore's gaze shifted. 'Well, come to think of it, I did let them fellers take it. Said they wanted a boat to fish in. I never seen 'em

afore, but they looked respec'able and I let 'em have it. Strangers roun' here, they was.'

'I see,' answered the sheriff carelessly. 'Reckon they lied to you, Moore, for they gave the skiff to these boys here.'

'No, they didn't,' began the owner. Then he stopped.

'Maybe they told you they didn't,' chuckled the sheriff, 'but the boys said they did. What did they tell you now?'

'I ain't seen 'em since,' muttered Tally.

'I see.' The sheriff's gaze roamed along the bank. Several stakes were driven into it at intervals and two of them still held rusty chains and padlocks. 'Sort of left you without anything to get around in, didn't it?' he asked.

'Brodie, over there, he lets me have his punt when I want it,' said Tally.

'Reckon you sold your motor-boat, too,' the sheriff mused.

Tally's eyes widened, then dropped quickly. 'I ain't had a power-boat for a good while,' he muttered.

'What do you call a good while?' asked the other, his eyes twinkling. ''Bout twelve hours?'

'Now, you look ahere,' replied Tally querulously. 'I ain't goin' answer no more fool questions. I got my work to do, I have.'

'Won't keep you much longer,' said the

sheriff soothingly. 'How much did you get for the power-boat?'

'That's my private affair,' answered the man with sullen dignity.

'Sure 'tis, sure 'tis! Just wanted to tell you that whatever money those fellows paid you ain't worth a cent.'

'What you mean?' demanded Tally in alarm.

'Counterfeit.'

'What! Counterfeit? Sheriff, you mean that?'

'Well, I mean they were printing the stuff up on Cypress Creek. 'Course they might have paid you in good money, but it don't seem likely. Haven't got it handy, have you?'

There was a moment's hesitation on the part of Tally. Then he turned and ran toward the cabin. He didn't go inside, though, but disappeared around the farther corner. He was gone several minutes.

'Got to dig it up, likely,' said the sheriff. "'Twas his power-boat they got, all right, Kinsey. Don't reckon he was in with 'em, though.'

The Secret Service agent shook his head. 'Too stupid, I guess,' he agreed.

Tally came back, panic in his colorless face. 'Here's what they gave me, Sheriff,' he said

hoarsely. 'Ain't that good money?' He yielded the bills to the other. There were eighteen of them. The sheriff sorted them into two lots; two hundred dollars of crisp, new paper and thirty-five dollars in old, creased bills. The new notes he passed on to Mr. Kinsey.

'I reckon this thirty-five is all right,' said the sheriff, 'but that new stuff —' He looked questioningly at the Secret Service man. The latter was already folding the bills and putting them into his pocket.

'Counterfeit,' he said briefly.

'You give 'em back here!' cried Tally. 'Good or bad, stranger, it's my money!'

'You hold your horses, Moore,' said the sheriff. 'Phoney money belongs to just one person, and that's Uncle Sam. This here's Mr. Kinsey, of the United States Secret Service.'

Tally stared open-mouthed. Then he swallowed hard. 'You mean I don't get nothin'?' he faltered.

'I wouldn't wonder a mite if you got your boat back,' answered the sheriff.

'The skunks!' broke out Tally angrily. He found worse names then, and mingled ugly oaths with his excited ravings until the sheriff silenced him.

'Moore,' he said, 'if you want we should get your power-boat back for you, you'd better tell

us the truth about the business. Here's your thirty-five. How comes it they paid you that much in real money?'

'That was first off,' answered Tally hurriedly in his hoarse tones. 'That was for the skiff. I sold it to 'em, good an' all. They was two of 'em come along about three weeks past. Strangers they was. Wanted a boat for fishin' an' offered me thirty for mine. I told 'em thirty-five an' they paid it. I didn't see 'em again till last night. Then one of 'em, the tall feller, comes here 'bout ten o'clock an' gets me out o' bed. Wants to buy the power-boat an' we haggles awhile an' he finally pays me two hundred dollars, the — the —'

'Never mind that,' soothed the sheriff. 'Two hundred was quite a price, I reckon, Moore. Must have wanted it bad, I'd say. Then what?'

'I come down here an' unlocked that padlock yonder and started it for him and he went off, the dirty —'

'And that's the last you saw of him? Or the others?'

'Yes,' Tally hesitated. Then he added, 'I heard 'em, though.'

'Heard them, eh? How's that?'

''Bout two o'clock, I reckon 'twas. I couldn't get to sleep again after he'd waked me up, an'

I was lyin' in the cabin when I heard the power-boat comin' down the creek. I'd know that engine anywhere, Sheriff. One of them cylinders ain't never spit just right. I heard it go by the end of the backwater yonder and keep on downstream.'

'About two o'clock, you say?'

'Nigh's I could tell. Reckon I'd been lyin' there awake more'n three hours. Sheriff, I needs a boat powerful. You goin' to let me have my skiff back, ain't you?'

'Course I am. You can have it for no more'n you sold it for.'

'Tain't worth thirty-five dollars,' said Tally indignantly. 'Tain't worth more'n ten, I reckon.'

'Oh, yes, it is. Call it thirty and you can have it.'

Tally shook his head. 'Twenty, Sheriff,' he offered.

'Not a cent less than thirty. Want it?'

'No! 'Tain't worth it. I can buy Brodie's punt for fifteen.'

'All right. Anything more you want to know from this man, Kinsey?'

'I don't think so. I want to tell him, though, that I could cause his arrest for having counterfeit money in his possession, and that I'm likely to do it if he doesn't stick right around here in

case I need him to identify those men later. Get that, Moore?’

‘I’ll be right here, sir,’ Tally assured him earnestly.

‘Now,’ said Sheriff Bowker, when the launch was once more making its way down the creek, ‘we’ll put you boys aboard your boat next. Casey, you know the short way to the Run from here?’

‘Don’t believe I do, Henry.’

‘Well, it’s first to your right. It’s a sharp turn, sort of hidden. I’ll watch for it.’

‘Mr. Bowker,’ said Pud, ‘does that skiff belong to us?’

‘Well, now, I don’t know.’ The sheriff rubbed his nose reflectively. ‘Maybe it does, Anson. Why?’

‘I was just thinking that we’d rather have had that twenty dollars he offered,’ answered Pud.

‘Oh, that’s it? Well, now, look here, son. That boat’s worth thirty if it’s worth a cent. Tell you what you do. You take it back up to Millville and see can’t you sell it there.’

‘I’d rather have the boat,’ declared Tim. ‘It’s a pretty good one, Pud. All it needs is calking and painting.’

‘We-ell,’ agreed Pud doubtfully. ‘Maybe it will be kind of fun to have a rowboat handy.’

'Ain' 'at the truth?' observed Harmon solemnly.

Pud and Tim exchanged glances. Here was a complication. It was plain that they would have to acquire Harmon's interest, if he possessed any. Pud wondered if he did. Although at the start of the expedition, Harmon's status had been that of a menial, Pud felt that he had since then attained to equality. Yes, beyond a doubt Harmon belonged, and, belonging, owned a third — well, anyway, a part of that skiff!

They took the turn that Pud had passed by the night before and almost at once debouched into Two-Pond Run. It was annoying to reflect that had he taken it, too, he would have found Tim and Harmon without difficulty. Still, in that case perhaps he wouldn't himself have been discovered by the police launch, and if he hadn't he would have missed all the exciting incidents of the morning.

'You reckon they went on out, don't you?' the sheriff was inquiring of Mr. Kinsey. "'Tain't likely, I suppose, they'd maybe run up around into Little Fox or Marsh Creek.'

'Not a bit,' was the reply. 'When this fellow Thorbourn saw his boat going off down the stream last night, he must have figured that the jig was up. Maybe he didn't know who was in it, Sheriff, but he did know he'd left this bundle

of the queer in it, and I guess he figured that River Swamp wasn't healthy any longer. We'll find they've made for the railroad, I guess. Some one's bound to have seen that motor-boat between here and Corbin.'

'They could get the train at Corbin,' said the sheriff.

'Not without being seen by too many folks. They want to save the press and the plates. If they hadn't, they'd have destroyed them back there, Sheriff. I thought maybe they had. Thought I might find them in the creek. But they hadn't. Took them with them and will look for new headquarters somewhere. I wouldn't be surprised if they'd gone right on down the river to Mumford.'

The *Kismet-Jolly Rodger-Vengeance* was just where they had left her an hour and a half before, and the boys were soon transferred. The skiff was untied from the police launch and made fast to the stern of the other. Pud was none too cheerful about the change, for he would vastly have preferred staying with the sheriff and Mr. Kinsey and the round-faced Mr. Casey and sharing in the further pursuit of the counterfeiters, but that, of course, was out of the question.

'Reckon,' said the sheriff, 'you can't get lost going down, boys. Follow the Run straight

south, past First Pond, and you'll come out at The Flat. Then it's two miles, about, to Corbin. And, say, when you get there, if I was you I'd stop and telephone your folks. I'll get word to them, too, but I reckon maybe they'd like to hear from you personal.'

'All right, sir,' agreed Pud. 'And thanks for finding us, and everything. And I hope you'll catch the counterfeitters.'

'Well, this gentleman here'll have to worry about that,' chuckled the sheriff. 'But from what I hear of his crowd, those counterfeitters haven't got a chance! You expecting to get back home to-night?'

'Gee, I don't know,' answered Pud. 'I guess it's too far, though.'

'Well, maybe 'tis. Anyway, you talk to your folks and fix it all right with them, son. And, say, if you stop at Livermore going up, come in and see me. Any one'll tell you where to find my office. Maybe I mightn't be in, but if I was I'd be glad to see you and show you 'round a bit. What say, Casey?'

The policeman was beckoning secretively and the sheriff tramped forward and held a whispered conversation with him. Once Pud heard him exclaim 'Well, I swan!' in rather amazed tones, and, having exclaimed, he turned to view the occupants of the adjoining

boat with a new and peculiar interest. Pud felt slightly uncomfortable. Perhaps Mr. Casey had been told about that rooster that had made a breakfast for them four days previous! But the sheriff was chuckling now, chuckling and nodding to Mr. Casey. Then, clearing his throat, he said: 'Anson, I reckon you'd better make a point of stopping in and seeing me before you go on home. There's — er — well, now, there's certain formalities that ought to be attended to. Being mixed up in this matter, more or less, maybe you'd ought to make an affidavit or something, eh?'

Pud agreed, somewhat puzzled. Tim's countenance showed that he didn't hold with affidavits and would much prefer not having anything further to do with the Law.

'Yes, well, now,' went on Sheriff Bowker, 'you see me at my office this afternoon or to-morrow morning. Don't forget!'

'No, sir, we won't,' answered Pud with scant enthusiasm.

'Better not,' said Mr. Casey, smiling broadly. 'It's going to be to your advantage, boys, as the advertisements has it!'

'Yes, that's so,' chuckled the sheriff. 'Well, see you later, then. Let her go, Casey.'

Good-byes were exchanged and the police launch surged away, churning, and fled down

the stream, her wash breaking against the bank in miniature waves. Pud and Tim waved as long as it was in sight and then, with one accord, jumped toward the locker that held food!

CHAPTER XXI

MR. LISCOMB IS GRATEFUL

THE return voyage began at twenty minutes to ten o'clock. At eleven they made The Flat, and, as Pud swung the launch's nose toward the outlet of the river, they looked toward the end of the nearer island. There were two fishermen there. One was clad in khaki trousers, a cotton shirt, and a wide-brimmed, sugar-loaf-crowned straw hat. He was bent motionless at the end of a weathered old punt, and beside him on the seat, apparently no less intent on the business in hand than his master, sat a yellow hound.

'Gee,' murmured Pud, 'I wonder if he's been there ever since!'

They did the two miles to Corbin in quick time, the current aiding, and tied up at the dock where they had stopped before. To Pud was delegated the not altogether pleasant task of communicating by telephone with Millville, and he set off with little relish for the nearest drug-store. Fortunately, Lank and Cocker had not found the small cardboard box in which Pud kept his money. Probably they would

have made a thorough search of the launch in the course of time, had it remained with them, but, as it was, they seemed not to have even looked into the lockers. Anyhow, the money was safe, and the fact made it possible for Pud to telephone without the necessity of reversing charges. Even so, it required all of ten minutes to get his house in Millville. Then his mother's voice came to him, quite as if she were just around the corner of the prescription counter, instead of thirty-odd miles away as the crow flies!

'Pud, dear, is that you? Are you sure you're all right? Your father just telephoned that they'd found you. Where *have* you been? Didn't you know we'd be worried to death at not hearing a single word from you?'

'Well, but, Mother, I *did* write! I —'

'Yes, I know, dear. It just came this morning, that letter. It had been missent to some other place. You know, dear, you don't write very carefully sometimes. And there was a letter from your Great-Aunt Sabrina, too, telling how you caught the robber that night. She wrote quite a lengthy letter, and sent a piece from the Livermore paper that praises you up wonderfully! I think it was most heroic, Pud, dear, and you must tell me all about it when you get back. Are you coming home to-night?'

'Gee, ma, I don't see how we can! We've got to stop in Livermore and see the sheriff there. Say, was Aunt Sabrina mad about us staying in her house that night?'

'Why, no, of course she wasn't! She was just awfully thankful, I suspect, that you were there. My, she'd have been heartbroken if the thief had taken her silver, Pud!'

'Well, he was going to take it, all right,' responded Pud. 'He had it all dumped in a bag and —' Just then a voice broke in to remind him that he had talked three minutes and he ended hurriedly. 'Back to-morrow afternoon, sure, Ma! Sorry you were worried. Yes'm! Yes'm! Good-bye!'

Well, that hadn't been so bad, after all, he reflected, mopping his perspiring brow as he backed from the booth. And the Livermore paper had had a piece about them catching the robber! Gee, that was great! He hurried back to spread the news to Tim and Harmon. Tim said they could maybe buy a copy of the paper when they got to Livermore. They bought enough gasoline to get them back to Millville and enough food to last them much farther! But they had missed two meals, and none of them were quite certain that they'd ever get thoroughly caught up!

Pud figured that they'd have to do about

nineteen miles before they reached Livermore again. It was twenty minutes to twelve when they cast off at Corbin, and if they averaged five miles an hour they should reach Livermore by four. They debated the question of making a return visit to Aunt Sabrina. Tim was in favor of it, but Pud, despite the fact that Aunt Sabrina was doubtless grateful to them, displayed no enthusiasm. Besides, there was Harmon.. Aunt Sabrina would undoubtedly view Harmon askance. She was, as Pud recalled, convinced that negroes were invariably thieves. She might allow him to sleep in the stable, but even that was uncertain. On the whole, Pud decided, it would be better to camp somewhere below the town and not bother Aunt Sabrina. Tim accepted the verdict with a sigh. Probably now he never would taste that lady's cocoanut cake!

Various well-remembered landmarks met their gaze as the launch chugged down the Fox, but it seemed a week rather than three days since they had last viewed them. Tim found the branch up which they had fled from the kidnapers and pointed it out, getting a disgusted 'Humph!' from Pud. It was mid-afternoon when, having lunched to repletion, Pud's still rather torpid gaze lighted on something ahead and to the right that had a strangely familiar look. Then he remembered.

They were back at the clearing where they had rescued Gladys Ermintrude, and there, just as they had last seen it, was the faded green shanty-boat, with, as Pud uneasily discovered the next moment, smoke issuing from the stove-pipe in its roof. The river was wide enough to let them pass well distant, and Pud instantly swung the launch's bow toward the farther side. The tumble-down wharf, farther along, peered around the corner of the shanty-boat and Pud set his gaze on it and wished it were already abeam. Tim, too, had now recognized the scene and drew Pud's attention.

'*S-sh!*' Pud whispered, motioning for silence. 'They're in there!'

'Oh!'

Then a spot of color appeared on the shanty-boat's narrow deck, a hand waved, and a friendly 'Oo-hoo!' came to them.

'It's Gladys Ermintrude,' said Tim eagerly.

'Well, what if it is?' inquired Pud coldly, refraining from joining the other in signals of response.

'Oo-hoo! Come on over!' called Gladys Ermintrude.

Pud scowled. If only she had stayed inside a minute or two longer! Tim said, 'Let's see what she wants, Pud.' Pud hesitated, muttered, and swung the launch across the stream. 'All

right,' he said as they neared the shanty-boat and Gladys Ermintrude, 'only don't blame me if — if something happens!'

'Hello,' said Gladys Ermintrude gayly as they came close.

'Hello,' replied Tim.

'Hello,' echoed Harmon from the stern.

'Huh,' muttered Pud, and viewed her suspiciously. Then he turned his suspicions toward the interior, wondering whether the girl had been, as before, the sole occupant of the cabin. Gladys Ermintrude was explaining that she had been back there for two days and was having a perfectly glorious time.

'Huh,' said Pud. 'What you been doing?'

'Oh, lots of things,' answered the girl brightly. 'Fishing and hunting and —'

'Cooking,' supplied Pud. 'Your ma said you were a good cook.'

Gladys Ermintrude accepted the tribute with unconcealed delight, to Pud's vast astonishment. 'Well, I just am,' she declared. 'I made the grandest cake yesterday!'

Tim's eyes grew luminous and he moistened his lips.

'I wish you'd come then instead of to-day. Pa and Uncle Asa ate the last of it this morning.'

Tim's eyes gloomed and he sighed. Tim had a notable weakness for cake.

'I suppose,' observed Pud, foiled in his first attempt to create confusion, but determined still, 'you'll be going into moving pictures this fall.'

'Moving pictures? Oh, my, no! What a funny idea!'

'I'll say so,' agreed Pud heartily, 'but it was your idea and not mine. You said you were studying to be a screen star, didn't you?'

'Did I?' Gladys Ermintrude's gaze wandered afar. 'How very strange. I simply don't remember —'

From beyond the open window came a sudden sound that might have been a short cough. It had its effect on all who heard it. Pud grasped the wheel again and darted a meaning look at Tim. Tim's hand moved toward the fly-wheel. Harmon stared in solemn suspicion. Gladys Ermintrude laughed lightly and continued rather hurriedly:

'Yes, I do remember now. I did say something like that, didn't I? But of course it was merely — merely a childish fancy.'

'Gee,' said Pud, 'you're full of childish fancies, aren't you? Like fancying you were kidnaped and that your name was Gladys Evinrude and — and —'

'Aw, Pud,' murmured Tim deprecatingly.

'Well, she did — is! She told a lot of whop-

pers and made goats of us, didn't she? Had us chasing up and down the river in the dark and —'

'Oh, well,' said Tim, 'what of it? It was sort of fun, I guess —'

'I don't tell "whoppers," Pud!' declared the girl heatedly. 'Maybe I did let you think things, but —'

'Think things! Gee, I suppose we "thought" you were kidnaped before you told us! Didn't you say, right there where you are now, that you'd been kidnaped from your happy home and that —'

'Why, sakes alive! How ever can you think up such outrageous stories? I'm sure I never said I'd been kid —'

Another sound from within!

'*Start her up!*' whispered Pud hoarsely.

'Well, maybe I did say so,' corrected Gladys Ermintrude flurriedly, 'but — but I'm sure I didn't mean to make any trouble —'

'Aw, that's all right,' muttered Tim. 'You mustn't mind Pud. He just —'

Then, as he turned the wheel over and, having failed to put the spark on, got no response from the engine, appalling sounds came from the shanty-boat's interior, sounds that were unmistakably those of heavy footsteps, and, before the alarmed Tim could try the engine a

second time, a tall figure appeared behind the lesser form of Gladys Ermintrude! It was a man who confronted them, a tall, wide-shouldered, bearded man. Pud's heart sank. This was undoubtedly the 'grateful' Mr. Liscomb!

'Well, boys,' said the apparition in a surprisingly pleasant, deep voice that, because of its striking similarity to hers, placed him instantly as Gladys Ermintrude's father, 'we meet at last!'

To Pud's surprise, Mr. Liscomb was smiling in a very friendly fashion, and, seen close-to, was not at all the desperate-looking person Pud had thought him. Just the same, Pud's suspicions were not wholly quieted, and, although he cleared his throat, no words came. At least, not from Pud; nor yet from Tim nor Harmon. Gladys Ermintrude, though, still had the power of speech.

'Yes,' she was saying, 'these are the boys who were so very kind to me, Father. This is Pud and that one's Ted — no, Tim, and that's Harmon back there. Harmon cooks wonderfully, Father.'

'Does, eh? Well, Tibbie, if I had a wonderful cook I'd look after him better. They've let him sit out in the sun until he's all tanned up!'

Pud and Tim smiled embarrassedly, but

Harmon gave the joke full value and exploded into 'Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!' Then he as suddenly subsided into silent solemnity. Mr. Liscomb chuckled and, one arm over his daughter's shoulders, turned his gaze back to Pud.

'You look mighty familiar to me,' he said. 'Live around here, Pud?'

'No, sir, Millville,' Pud managed.

'Millville? Guess I don't know any one in Millville. What's the rest of your name?'

'Pringle,' said Pud. 'Anson Pringle.'

'Anson Pringle? Then your father's Pringle, of the *Courant* up there! You're Anson Pringle, junior, eh?'

'I suppose so,' allowed Pud. 'Folks call me Pud, usually.'

'Well, well! Why, I know your father, son, know him right well. Both newspaper men, you see. I'm assistant editor of the *Corbin Journal*. You tell him you met Bill Liscomb, will you? Tell him you ran off with his girl!' The speaker chuckled, and Pud ventured a doubtful grin.

'She said —' he murmured. 'I mean, you see, we didn't understand — exactly —'

'Oh, that's all right, Pud! You don't need to apologize. Here's the culprit right here.' He gave Gladys Ermintrude a hug. 'She's a

pretty good sport, boys, but she's got an imagination about ten sizes too large for her, and she reads too many silly stories and sees too many foolish movies. But we're going to change all that, aren't we, Tibbs? We're going to cut out the novels and most of the movies for awhile, eh?'

Gladys Ermintrude assented readily, even gayly.

'Yes, we had a little — ah — conference the other day after she got home and she promised to be more careful of her statements. She's going to get the upper hand of that powerful imagination of hers pretty soon. I wouldn't be surprised if, after a while, she got so you could believe every word she tells you!'

'Why, Father!' murmured the girl in shocked tones. 'How can you speak so before strangers?'

'Oh, I guess they can stand it,' her father chuckled. 'Which way are you boys heading? Down the river, eh?'

'Yes, sir,' answered Pud, 'we're going home. We're going as far as Livermore to-night.'

'I'll bet you've had a fine time, too. It's a wonderful thing to get away into the quiet of the woods and streams for a few days now and then!'

'Yes, sir,' agreed Pud, wondering if the word 'quiet' was just the right one!

‘Wish I could ask you-all to stay and have supper with us,’ went on Mr. Liscomb genially, ‘but I guess we’d be rather crowded, and I’m not too sure we’d have enough for all hands. Sort of depends on what my brother brings home when he comes.’

‘We — I guess we’d better not,’ said Pud. ‘Thank you very much, sir.’

‘Not at all. Glad to have you if you want to take a chance. I feel sort of indebted to you for the way you looked after this young lady, boys. Mighty fine of you to do it. My regards to your father when you get home, Pud. And good luck to you!’

Gladys Ermintrude waved as long as they were in sight. So did Tim. Pud had a somewhat thoughtful look when, presently, Tim came forward and seated himself.

‘I suppose,’ said Pud after a moment, ‘it’s sort of a habit with her.’

‘What is? Who?’

‘Gladys Evinrude: telling those fairy stories like she does. You know, Tim, I used to sort of — sort of —’

‘I’ll say you did,’ chuckled Tim.

‘Well, I never told regular whoppers like she does,’ Pud defended. ‘I never said anything that wasn’t so, did I? Did you ever know me to tell a lie?’

'No-o, but — but, gosh, you can make folks think things that ain't so, Pud!'

'Sure. But I don't tell lies. She does, you might say. Only she doesn't mean 'em to be lies, I suppose. She — she's fanciful. That's her trouble. I guess we oughtn't to be too hard on her, Tim.'

'Well, who was hard on her, I'd like to know? I wasn't!'

'I guess a fellow *can* see too many movies,' continued Pud thoughtfully. 'That is, he can, if he has a — an imagination to start with. I guess I'll cut them out, Tim.'

'All of them?' asked Tim anxiously.

Pud shifted uneasily on his feet. 'Well, maybe the right sort of pictures don't do any harm,' he compromised. 'Of course that Gladys Evinrude —'

'It isn't Evinrude; it's Ermintrude.'

'It ain't either,' chuckled Pud. 'It's Tibbie! Anyway, what I was going to say was — was —' But Pud had lost the thread of his discourse, and before he could pick it up again, Tim spoke.

'Say, she looked kind of — kind of pretty to-day, Pud.'

'Pretty?' Pud considered briefly. 'Well, I guess maybe she looked better than she did that other time, but she's awfully skinny!'

'I don't think she's skinny,' defended Tim warmly. 'Of course she isn't what you might call *fat*, like — well, like —'

'She's skinny,' declared Pud flatly. 'Say, I wish I'd asked her one question, Tim, just one question!'

'What's that?' inquired Tim.

'Because,' chuckled Pud, 'she'd have had to tell the truth, with her father there and everything.'

'What question?'

'Why,' Pud snickered, 'whether he spanked her or not! I'll bet you anything he did!'

CHAPTER XXII

THE PIRATES RETURN

THEY made surprisingly good time to the mouth of Fox River and then covered six of the seven miles that lay between that point and Livermore in an hour and twenty minutes. It certainly seemed as though the launch knew it was going home and wanted to get there! It was still only a little past four o'clock, and they might have got back to Millville that night if it had not been for their promise to call on the sheriff. Of course, they would have had to finish the voyage in early darkness, but Pud had done so much night navigation that the thought brought no dismay. But there was the agreement with Sheriff Bowker to be considered, and so, instead of keeping on past the city, they looked for a place to spend the night.

Tim didn't think much of the idea of looking up the sheriff, and said so more than once. 'What's he want to see us for?' he asked. 'We told him all we knew, didn't we? Suppose he wants to put us in jail as witnesses. They do that sometimes. Or suppose he heard about that chicken! I say let's go on home, Pud.'

'No, sir, we can't do that. We promised.

Besides, that Mr. Casey said it would be to our — our advantage, didn't he?'

'Oh, gosh, they'll say anything to get you in their clutches, the police will!'

'The sheriff isn't the police,' said Pud. 'He's different.'

'He arrests folks just the same, doesn't he? I don't see much difference!'

'Well, you will. Anyway, we said we'd do it and we've just got to, haven't we?'

'I suppose so,' replied Tim regretfully.

The best they could discover as a tent-site was the edge of a brick-yard, an unattractive place littered with old cans and broken bricks and exposed to the public view on all sides. Indeed, a line of trolley cars buzzed past only a short block distant. But they could see nothing better, and they were rapidly approaching the wharves of the town. So they put the launch as close to the muddy shore as possible and landed by means of the skiff.

It was not until they had the tent ashore that Tim asked abruptly: 'Say, Pud, know what day this is?'

Pud had to think a minute, but he finally said it was Saturday; adding, 'What of it?'

'Then to-morrow will be Sunday,' answered Tim triumphantly, 'and I guess even sheriffs don't go to business on Sunday!'

‘Gee, I wonder!’ exclaimed Pud. ‘But he said we could see him either to-day or to-morrow, didn’t he? Maybe he forgot about it being Sunday, though.’

‘I’ll bet he did. So what’s the good of stopping here? He wouldn’t expect us to wait until Monday, Pud.’

‘No, but’ — Pud looked at his watch and then at a vanishing trolley car — ‘but it’s only twenty minutes past four. We’ll go and see him now! It won’t take long to get there by trolley, Tim!’

‘Oh, gosh!’ muttered Tim.

A few minutes later, leaving Harmon in charge of operations, they went. A ten-minute ride took them to their destination and a friendly but curious conductor directed them. He had wanted to know, when Pud had asked for the sheriff’s office, if they were going to give themselves up! They found the Court-House easily and made their way along a corridor until a tin sign over a glass-paneled door brought them to a halt. Pud didn’t know whether to knock or enter without knocking, so he compromised by rapping his knuckles once and turning the knob at the same instant. Tim followed inside looking so much like a criminal that Sheriff Bowker would have been justified in arresting him on suspicion!

'Well, hello, hello!' greeted Mr. Bowker. 'Come in, boys, and make yourselves at home!' He removed his legs from a corner of his desk and arose to pull a couple of chairs forward from the row that stood along one wall. 'Well, you got here pretty quick, didn't you? I just heard from — Wait a minute, though. I'd better see if I can get Mr. Hosford. Maybe he's gone home a'ready, but if he hasn't —'

The sheriff took up the telephone and, while Pud and Tim stared about the rather bare and not too clean room, engaged in a brief conversation with some one. The sheriff's pleased announcement into the mouthpiece to the effect that 'they're here, if you want to see 'em' brought no joy to Tim. The conversation appeared to satisfy the sheriff, though, for he beamed when he had hung up again.

'Well, that's all right,' he declared, rubbing his big hands together. 'He's coming right over. Lucky you didn't turn up five minutes later, for he was just going home.'

'Who, sir?' asked Pud.

'Mr. Hosford. He's president of — never mind now, though. He'll be here in a jiffy. I was going to tell you that I just got word from Police Headquarters that Kinsey nabbed his men about two o'clock, boys! Quick work, eh?'

‘Really?’ exclaimed Pud. ‘Lank and Cocker and — and the other one?’

‘All three, and a boatload of stuff, too, he says. They were in that power-boat of Tally Moore’s down near Trowman’s Landing, this side of Mumford. Reckon they were meaning to go ashore there. I ain’t heard the particulars yet. Well, I reckon Tally’ll be glad to get his boat back.’

‘Was there — was there any fighting, sir?’ asked Pud.

‘I didn’t hear. Kinsey had three men with him, though, in the police launch, so I guess those fellows didn’t kick up much. Quick work, I’ll say!’

‘Yes, sir,’ agreed Pud. ‘Gee, I wish I’d been along! Wouldn’t it have been great, Tim?’

‘Yes,’ said Tim. But somehow it sounded a lot more like ‘No’!

At that minute the door opened and a man of about forty years entered briskly.

‘Afternoon, Mister Sheriff! So these are the boys, eh?’

‘Yes, sir, here they are. Boys, this is Mr. Hosford, president of the Chamber of Commerce. Mr. Hosford, this is Anson Pringle, and this is Timothy Daley. Anson’s pa runs the *Courant* up to Millville. Maybe you know him.’

Mr. Hosford regretted that he hadn’t that

honor as he shook hands with Pud and Tim. Then he took the chair that the sheriff set for him and smiled at his audience. 'Well,' he said, 'I guess we don't have to make a ceremony of this, young gentlemen. I've brought the check with me and I'll just hand it over, with my congratulations.' He put a hand into an inner pocket and produced a long, slim oblong of pale-green paper. 'We made this out to Anson Pringle?' He looked inquiringly at the sheriff. 'That's what you said, eh?'

'That's right, Mr. Hosford. It was him that had the bundle of money, so —'

'I don't know what you mean,' said Pud faintly.

'Why, I'm talking about the reward,' said Mr. Hosford. 'You knew there was a reward of five hundred dollars offered, didn't you?'

'I reckon he didn't,' laughed the sheriff. 'We didn't say anything to him, Mr. Hosford. Thought we'd wait and —'

'You mean,' gasped Pud, 'that my father offered five hundred dollars for — for me?'

'Well, hardly,' answered Mr. Hosford, smiling, 'although I dare say you'd be well worth it. No, this reward was offered a week or so ago by the Livermore Chamber of Commerce and the banks for information leading to the apprehension of the persons engaged in circu-

lating counterfeit bank-notes hereabouts. Thought, of course, you knew about it. The sheriff here and a Mr. Kinsey, sent by the Department of Justice awhile back, assured us that you had earned it and so — well, here it is, my boy! And my congratulations go with it!’

Still dazed, Pud accepted the check, looked at it vaguely, and then turned to Sheriff Bowker. ‘You mean that — that it’s *mine*?’ he asked incredulously.

‘Sure is, Anson! Earned it, didn’t you? If you hadn’t given the information you did, they’d still be searching for those fellows, I reckon.’

‘Well, I must go along.’ Mr. Hosford again shook hands with the boys, nodded to the sheriff, said ‘Good-afternoon!’ and departed. With the closing of the door behind him, Tim darted from his seat.

‘Gosh, Pud, let’s see!’ he stammered.

Pud and he both looked then. ‘Livermore Trust Company,’ they read, ‘Pay to the order of Anson Pringle Five Hundred Dollars.’

‘Gosh!’ said Tim in an awed voice. ‘What are you going to do with it, Pud?’

Pud shook his head helplessly. Then he brightened as he exclaimed: ‘’Tain’t all mine, you silly chump! It’s half yours!’

'Mine!' said Tim. 'I guess not! What did I have to do with it? You're crazy!'

'I'm not either! I'll leave it to Mr. Bowker if —'

'Boys, you'll have to leave me out of it,' protested the sheriff, waving a hand. 'You'll have to settle whose it is between you, I reckon.'

'Well, it's half his,' declared Pud stubbornly, 'and — say, Tim, we never even thanked him!'

'You mean you didn't,' Tim corrected. 'I guess he understood, though, that you were sort of — of flabbergasted, Pud.'

Somehow in the next five minutes they said good-bye to the sheriff, promised to call and see him the next time they were in Livermore, and found their way to the street. The idea of taking a car back to the launch was utterly repellent. There was too much to be said! So they started back on foot, and when, at the first corner, a telephone sign met Pud's eyes, he dragged Tim inside a store and disappeared himself into a booth. He was out five minutes later, flushed and triumphant.

'I got Dad, at the office,' he proclaimed. 'He doesn't believe it about the reward. He just kept on saying, "Yes, yes, Pud, I know, I know." He thinks I'm joking, but when he sees that check —' Pud broke off to chuckle enjoy-

ably. 'I told him we'd be back by one o'clock to-morrow, Tim, and he said he'd tell your father when he went home.'

They went on, taking up the discussion where they had dropped it. Tim was very determined not to share the reward and Pud was just as determined that he should. The argument lasted most of the way back to where they had left the launch, and Tim's consent was finally obtained when Pud threatened to tear the check up. 'I will,' he declared firmly; 'I'll tear it up right now and stuff the pieces down that hole, Tim! Why, gee, we were all in it! Why, it was you who heard those fellows first that time up on Cypress Lake. You said, "I hear a boat, Pud," and I said "Let's shout," and —'

'Oh, all right,' said Tim, 'only it doesn't seem fair. And as to me hearing that boat first, I didn't, Pud. It was Harmon.'

'Was it? Well, anyway —' Then Pud stopped abruptly. 'Say, Tim, what about him, eh? Harmon, I mean.'

'Gosh, that's so!'

They went on in thoughtful silence for a short distance. Then, 'He's a pretty good guy, that Harmon,' muttered Pud. 'He — he's been mighty handy, the way he's cooked and — and all!'

'Sure,' said Tim. 'Of course, in a way —'

'Yes, I know that, but when you think of it —'

'Sure! That's what I meant!

'Well, then, if we each give him twenty-five —'

'Yes, seems to me that would be fair,' agreed Tim readily. 'Gosh, fifty dollars would be a lot of money to Harmon!'

'You think we ought to give him more?' asked Pud anxiously.

'No, I don't, Pud. I think fifty's fair, don't you?'

'Yes, *I* do, but I thought maybe you thought it wasn't. He's a pretty good fellow and I wouldn't like to feel that — that we weren't doing the right thing. There he is now. He's got the tent up, too! And I believe he's started getting supper! Say, won't he be tickled when —'

'Won't he!'

They started running.

It was well short of one o'clock the next day when the launch poked its nose under the bridge at Millville and chugged on toward Andy Tremble's boat-yard. Pud stood proudly at the wheel, Tim officiated at the throttle, and Harmon sat on the stern planking with his bare feet on the seat below and observed the pass-

ing world with haughty grandeur, a grandeur befitting a colored gentleman recently come into a fortune!

Behind the launch came the skiff, the only visible trophy of the pirates' expedition, since, doubtless to Harmon's disappointment, not one town had been sacked. And yet, as Pud had observed farther down the river that forenoon, they hadn't done so badly for pirates new to the business, for they were returning with five hundred dollars and a perfectly good row-boat, and without the loss of a man!

As the launch turned the bend above the island and the landing came into sight, Pud blinked his eyes. For a moment it looked as if all Millville had gathered to welcome them home, but a second look showed that the group ahead numbered no more than ten persons; a dozen at the outside. There were Pud's father and mother, and Tim's father, and Harmon's father and mother and two small sisters, and Andy Tremble and Mr. Ephraim Billings and Marshal Bud Garvey and — oh, gee — Mr. Tully, the minister! Pud wished then that he had taken the new names from the bow. Here it was a Sunday and there was that lettering down there staring right at everybody and spelling *Jolly Rodger!* They were waving now, and Pud waved back, and so did Tim. And

there was Andy Tremble pointing at something and laughing fit to kill himself, and Bud Garvey laughing too. And they weren't looking at the name on the bow, either. They were looking farther astern. Pud looked, too. Then he wilted.

Harmon, stiff with dignity, solemn as a judge, sat with folded arms upon the after deck, while, behind him, placed there unknown to Pud and Tim, the disreputable white flag adorned with the skull-and-cross-bones spread itself to the breeze!

THE END

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